

Staying Faithful to God's Word With Supernatural Boldness

Pastor Mark Burns is shaking religious and political norms to their foundations. He has been unwilling to bow to the expectations of man and instead has pledged radical obedience to the voice of God. As a result, he has been thrust into the very heart of the national struggle for the soul of this country.

Many Americans first came to know Burns through the viral video footage of evangelical pastors praying for then-presidential candidate Donald Trump. How he ended up as a bold spokesman for Black conservatives—and where he sees God taking him next—is a story of supernatural occurrences and divine directives. As unlikely as it sounds, it may have begun when the Lord told him to stop the worship at his church.

Burns understands what it's like to start at the bottom. Born in Anderson, South Carolina, on Sept. 21, 1979, one of three children of Pastors Debra and Otis Burns, he was born again at a revival meeting at age 9. Even then, his parents recognized God's call on his life, but in his teen years, young Burns strayed from the faith. Arrested four times for traffic violations, he had his car repossessed several times, which forced him to ride a bike to his job at McDonald's. He became the teenage father of three children—Jasmine, Desiree and John Mark Jr.—but his first marriage soon ended.

Burns' life appeared stuck at an impossibly low level. "I was arrested for traffic violations because my license was suspended for unpaid traffic tickets," Burns says. "It was very difficult to pay simple traffic tickets during those times. I really do know what it means to be on food stamps,

Section 8 Housing and WIC [the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, a federal assistance program].

Answering God's Call

Throughout his teenage struggles, Burns' parents consistently prayed for their prodigal to answer the call of God on his life.

"When I became a teen father at 17 and 18, I never left the church," he says. "I just made a foolish decision that deviated me from my purpose for a while."

Burns served six years in the Army National Guard at Fort Bend, Georgia. He tried college a few times but kept dropping out. Finally, as a young man of 24, Burns followed his passion as worship and praise leader in several churches, including his father's home church from 2004 to 2005.

In 2004, Burns married again. His new wife, Tomarra, brought two children, Jordynn and Dymmond, into the marriage. Together, the Burnses had twins, Solomon and Somarra, now 16, the youngest of their seven children.

After pastoring a Black mission church from 2005 to 2009, Burns started a new church, Harvest Praise and Worship Center, in Easley, South Carolina.

"I'm a praise and worship leader by heart," says Burns. "I played keyboards in a worship band and directed a choir. I had high caliber musicians and singers. Praise and worship meant so much to me that I kept 'praise and worship' in the name of the church."

Harvest Praise and Worship Center quickly outgrew its small building, and Burns moved his burgeoning congregation into an old 1930s movie theater—complete with balcony, stage and original movie screen—and renovated it for their meetings. He

worked hard to enhance the music in the church, installing a smoke machine and robotic lights. Soon his 14-member praise team lit up the stage.

In 2009, Burns also began his own television show for Impact Network, the world's largest independent Black faith-based television network.

"I was traveling, representing Impact Network for Pastor Wayne T. Jackson out of Detroit," Burns says. "I felt I needed to support their vision to broadcast predominantly Black ministers and to preach on TV. My church members and family and cameras and I all traveled, and I recorded Lift My Voice and then aired it on Impact Network every Saturday."

As Burns traveled around the country each weekend, his church in Easley grew to more than 1,000 members. Even with this apparent success, Burns saw a growing trend in his own church and others that bothered him.

"I began to see other churches doing the same thing," he says. "From one church to the next, people were singing, shouting, hollering—but people's lives were not impacted. I realized I was doing the same thing. Yes, we were growing as a church and in members, but I felt like I was entertaining people."

Various pastors Burns met in his travels said they felt church had become just another club, and they worked to make people feel good about going to that club.

"I became more critical of my own ministry than any other," Burns says. [We had] musicians who were highly talented but didn't live lives that were holy. There were arguments between musicians because one wanted to play a particular song."

Dropping the Mic

On New Year's Eve, 2014, Mark and Tomarra Burns led a small meeting of about 50 other musicians for a time of praise and

worship on the stage that his church members fondly referred to as “the altar.” Every Sunday, people could come forward to soak in the presence of God or receive prayer.

As Burns sat at the keyboard that night, he heard God say, “Mark, stop praise and worship for one year. For one year, just teach one hour—and one hour only—to your people.”

He laughed it off at first, telling the Lord, “No, You’re not really saying that. How can you build a church without a great worship team?”

At that very moment, his wife walked across the stage, bent down and whispered the confirmation of God’s direction: “The Lord just told me that we have to stop praise and worship for a year.”

Burns felt frustrated and angry at first, dropping his head over the keyboard and attempting to argue with God. At 11:45 p.m., he received another divine directive: “You make sure you pull everything off that altar—every keyboard, microphone, instrument off the altar—before midnight strikes.”

“I told everyone there what the Lord just said,” Burns says. “Immediately we pulled drums, organ, mics, off the altar—off the stage.”

Burns calls that evening his “Abrahamic moment.” Just as Abraham did with Isaac, he surrendered what he cherished and obeyed the word from God. He taught for one hour each Sunday for one year, then two years and then three. The church membership dwindled until the congregation had to move back into the smaller building they had left.

Looking back, Burns compares his larger theater church to a beautiful shiny car with leather seats and a glossy paint job—but with no engine and no real power.

As Harvest Praise and Worship Center settled back into its

smaller building, God directed Burns to begin his own television network, which he called the NOW Network. Before he started, he went to Wayne and Beverly Jackson of Impact Network and asked for their blessing, which they readily gave.

“They opened a door for me and taught me how to have a TV network,” says Burns. “Every major door the Lord has opened up for me has come through serving somebody else’s vision.”

Although church membership dwindled, the NOW Network grew to its reach today, broadcasting into 263 million homes and 83 countries on digital cable television, satellite, Apple TV, Amazon, Android App and Roku as well as online at . As the network expanded, its finances increased until NOW began to undergird the church’s outreach into the community.

Harvest Praise and Worship Center has established a place in the Easley community for battered women to live until they can get jobs and get on their feet. The church reaches out to help numerous people in financial distress obtain jobs, change their credit scores, become homeowners, find apartment housing and receive a car as needed.

Leading in Politics

God used Burns’ business acumen to open the door for his relationship with Trump. It was 2015, and all Burns knew was that he and his wife were set to meet with a millionaire who was considering a run for president—a man with a television show that ended, “You’re fired!” The success of Burns’ NOW Network had caught Trump’s eye, and he wanted to meet the young entrepreneur.

Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue, New York City, represented a whole new world for this 36-year-old pastor from the backwoods of South Carolina. When Burns escorted his wife into the luxury hotel lobby, he was stunned to see Dr. David Jeremiah, Franklin Graham, Paula White, Clarence McClendon and other Christian leaders. Who am I to be among so many of God’s

generals? he wondered.

"I was more excited about meeting them than I was about meeting Donald Trump," Burns recalls. "I wanted pictures with all of them!"

The Christian leaders were led up an elevator and into the famous boardroom, where place cards designated guests' seats. Burns knew he wouldn't have a place card, so he sat in a chair away from the table. Trump's former attorney, Michael Cohen, struck up a conversation with him, and the next thing Burns knew, Cohen pulled out the chair directly opposite Trump's chair at the head of the table and said, "Pastor, come here. You sit right here."

At this point, Burns' nerves almost took over. I'm not up to the level of these godly leaders, he thought. How can I possibly be seated at the head of the table?

Just then, Trump walked in, Bible in hand, and sat down. He told the group he believed Christianity was under attack, and Christians no longer had a friend in the White House. For the first 35 minutes, the ministers around the table talked, agreeing that Trump should run for president, and they would support him.

"I was nervous," Burns says. "My wife was over there taking pictures and a video clip, thinking, What a great memory. I'm praying, 'Lord, please don't let them ask me a question. I don't want to look stupid.'"

That's when Burns heard a voice. "You belong here. I placed you here."

In that moment, Burns' whole posture changed. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him and gave him the boldness he needed.

"Mr. Trump, many of us Black leaders have caught flack just for coming to this meeting," he said. "In fact, others were

scheduled to come and elected not to come because of the hate they received from our own community. So clearly, Mr. Trump, there is a disconnect between you, the Republican Party and the African American community. What will be your plan to bridge that gap?"

The room fell silent except for the voices of three other Black pastors, who readily agreed with Burns' question.

Trump immediately sat up and engaged in dialogue with the Black ministers. As the meeting came to a close, Jeremiah prayed that God would raise up a strong African American leader who would guide Trump through the African American community—words Burns could not ignore.

When Tomarra posted her video of the group praying for Trump on Facebook, neither she nor her husband realized it would receive more than 1.9 million views.

"My wife was recording just to document her husband in a group of powerful people," Burns says. "It wasn't a publicity stunt. We were ignorant."

After the meeting, Trump asked Burns if he would be willing to help their mutual friend, Dr. Darrell Scott, put together another gathering—this one just for Black pastors and leaders. Trump wanted to revisit their earlier conversation and listen to the concerns from the Black community.

Burns agreed. Back home in South Carolina, he easily reached out to 50 associates who were part of his NOW Network, a hub of primarily Black television preachers and leaders who broadcast into millions of homes on cable and satellite television every week. He and Scott organized the first event in Atlanta, but Trump arrived late due to a schedule change. "You all follow me," Trump told the assembled group.

"When we walked through the door, there were a bunch of cameras and records, and I thought, What in the world?" Burns

says.

"Pastor, you're on CNN!" people told him.

Burns was thrust onto the national stage in that moment and emerged as a leading voice in conservative politics and one of Trump's most vocal supporters. He made appearances on Fox News, MSNBC, Fox Business, Newsmax and more. On July 21, 2016, he delivered an energizing speech at the Republican National Convention, where he told the audience that Trump wouldn't pander to one race, then stirred the audience to break out in chants declaring, "All lives matter." But before long, the media discovered an online bio page and accused him of lying about his years in the service and his education.

"I had just started preaching," Burns says of the bio. "I was in the midst of working full time and trying to make something of myself. I was so young. A church member helped me write it. That bio was from an old website and unpublished. I tried to explain that to the CNN people. I said, 'If you keep digging things up, you will see failures.' I had seatbelt tickets. I'd been in situations with the law that were not criminal, but I'd not paid tickets. You can't talk about that without talking about grace of Jesus: 'While we were yet sinners, Jesus died for us.'"

Although the media and protesting hecklers worked to catch him off guard, Burns navigated the storm and, in the end, Yahoo News named him as one of the 16 people who shaped the presidential election of 2016. Time magazine called him "Donald Trump's Top Pastor."

Burns himself ran for office in South Carolina's 4th Congressional District in 2018, attempting to take Rep. Trey Gowdy's seat. After a 45-day run, Burns lost.

"I got my foot in the water," he says of the brief campaign. "It was a great experience."

Speaking the Truth

So what is Burns' message for 2021? He tells audiences everywhere that colors do matter—and the colors that define America are red, white and blue.

"Antifa and BLM [Black Lives Matter Inc.] put guns to people's heads, forcing Americans to believe the way they want them to believe," he says. "There are street preachers in America who've been attacked. LGBTQ [adherents] physically assaulted them for preaching Jesus Christ."

Burns believes the Constitution protects same sex-marriage but draws the line at the LGBTQ community leveling assaults against Christians. In fact, he calls on Christian leaders to denounce the Equality Act in particular because he believes if it passes, religious institutions will no longer be protected in the United States.

As for the issue of violence, Burns has a message he wants all Americans to hear.

"Martin Luther King Jr. was not violent in protesting racism," he says. "Somebody has to be John the Baptist. Somebody has to be the firestarter and speak up and say that BLM is not love, but it is hate and contrary to what Jesus tells us. The greatest commandment is to love your God with all your heart and mind and soul. The second greatest is to love your neighbor as you love yourself."

Burns believes the church is America's only hope. He tells Christians to stand boldly for the faith handed down to the saints so we will see an awakening take place in our nation.

Burns says, "CRT is critical race theory, and we know what all this means because everybody is talking about it. They talk about it. They talk about it some more. These are minority groups, but they are talking about it.

“As Christians, we need to talk,” he adds. “You may not have the privilege to speak to the president, but you can speak to school board members. Just think—if every top 10 to 20 parents show up together at the schoolhouse and demand that CRT is not taught, then the media has to deal with it. Cellphones are lit all over, and the world will know that this place is standing up against CRT.”

Burns cites Mordecai’s words to Esther, “For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” (Esth. 4:14, NIV).

“Pastors across our nation were born at this time, not the day of Billy Sunday, Billy Graham, Oral Roberts or Azusa Street,” Burns says. “We were born in this time for such a time as this. God made it clear to Esther. God said, ‘I will deliver’—yet God is the only person who will fire you and still let you keep working. We are allowing our government to organize one of the greatest forms of child abuse and allowing children to have gender reassignment at early ages. We are allowing it to happen.”

He tells pastors, faith leaders, prayer warriors and laypeople to stand boldly for the faith, encouraging them to start on a local level in their own churches and communities.

“For years, pastors have been the moral authority of this nation,” Burns says. “When we spoke in the past, the country listened. Now, that is not the case. We’ve been challenged from every side. We do not rise up violently. We organize, speak up and speak to our pastors and community. Challenge the local school boards, the state government and ultimately let your voice be heard by the governor of your state. Stop being cowards. Be bold! Invoke the power of God that we say we have.”

Will he run for office in the future? It is currently his intention to run for Congress in South Carolina in the 2022 election.

“It started with being willing to sacrifice my church,” Burns explains. “Had I not done that, and removed everything from the altar, I’d still just have a nice-sized church, but that’s all I’d be doing.

“Now the Lord has given me a fight, and we are reenergizing churches across the nation to be bold and not be silent when it comes to policies that are directly against the Word of God,” he says. “That’s where I am now.”

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C. Hope Flinchbaugh has written more than 250 stories for preschool, kindergarten, first- and second-grade school readers for the Association of Christian Schools International. The author of three novels and two nonfiction books, all traditionally published, she has also written more than 75 magazine articles for children and adults.

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