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SOVEREIGN DEPENDENCY: A MEASURE OF OUR TRUST IN GOD'S PROVISION

In his best known experiment, Dr. Ivan Pavlov (1849 -1936), a famous Russian scientist, inadvertently discovered how to manipulate perceptions, and thus behaviors, by linking a specific stimulus to a desired response. The procedure began with a ringing bell, which was immediately followed by food being given to a hungry dog. The sight and smell of the food caused the dog to salivate in anticipation of eating. Done repeatedly, the dog eventually associates the ringing bell with mealtime and begins to salivate as soon as the bell is rung, thus linking the stimulus of the bell to the salivation response. Once the dog is conditioned to expect food to come after the bell, it will salivate for a surprising number of repetitions, even when it is not fed. Then, only an occasional feeding is required to keep the salivating behavior in place.

It was upon these simple stimulus-response principles that Soviet doctrine was implemented. Once people had been conditioned to believe in and become dependent upon the state to meet their needs, they rarely questioned the facts. It was a tormenting life for those who could see the truth, because they knew the consequences they would endure if they gave any indication that they were not true believers. So they avoided social and economic retribution by

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speaking only about the promises that were fulfilled by their government, not those that were broken. The similarities between the people who rationalized the inconsistencies of Soviet life and those who have become dependent upon the institutional church to meet their needs for security, identity or belonging cannot be ignored. The Soviets and the institutional church have proven a simple fact about human nature: people can be easily misled by a political or religious doctrine if it is presented as the path to fulfilling their desires or escaping pressures.

Because of the cynicism that the Soviet doctrine created, the goal of the typical Russian I encountered was to gain control of my life, and thus my assets, by manipulating my perceptions and causing me to become dependent upon him in some way. And they were not amateurs. Many were trained in Soviet leadership schools where they learned the deceptive skills they needed to mislead their own people. Almost everyone had rejected the concept of moral restraint and had turned to gaining what they wanted by whatever means possible. As a result, I often felt like the dog in someone's experiment as a series of businessmen, politicians, bureaucrats, doctors, priests, and even plumbers tried to link one of my needs or desires to their bell. I routinely turned down offers of food, drink, sex, and money, as they tried to make me salivate.

And there were a number of things that could be done to lower one's resistance, like deliberately creating mistakes in documents or delays in approvals that were needed. I am certain that the hot water and heating system to my apartment were once turned off in sub-zero weather so that the culprit could then assume the role of helper and friend by getting the problems "repaired." But the most subtle manipulation was the "instigator/mediator" conspiracy method. In this scenario, a personal or business conflict is ignited by one player in the conspiracy, while the second conspirator offers his or her assistance in mediating. In the process of reconciling the situation, the friendly mediator gains your trust, causing you to become vulnerable to a misstated fact, manipulated perception, or devious tactic that you might otherwise have recognized and rejected.

During one period of particularly difficult challenges, I had sixteen separate conflicts involving people with evil motives. I had

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even received threats from people who opposed the level of accountability we imposed on our projects. I began to wonder if something was inherently wrong with our vision or me. So I prayed and asked the Lord why we kept facing such trials. He reminded me where I was and for whom I was working. Then He made it clear that He was purposely challenging the values of an amoral culture through our projects. The pressures of working under those conditions provided both the intense practice I needed to avoid becoming spiritually lazy, and the motivation to look within myself for adjustments. In the process, He was forwarding His agenda on both sides of the spiritual balance sheet, theirs and mine. Each phase of my life has allowed me to practice and prepare for the next. And in each phase, the tests and opportunities became greater. I had prepared for Russia and other business endeavors by learning to discern good and evil in the institutional church. Russia was teaching me to keep a constant vigil.

We had served many elderly patients in the city, both at our hospital and at free clinics we had sponsored. We had also distributed many tons of medicines to hospitals around the city. As a result, we often found an appreciative relative working in customs or at some other important intersection of authority. One such man, Mr. Paskevich, had shown a sincere interest in our efforts during my occasional visits to his office and he often asked very pertinent questions. When I explained some of the problems I had endured, he became openly irritated that I should have to be concerned with such things “while trying to do good deeds for the elderly of St. Petersburg.” I couldn’t have agreed with him more and I knew that he understood my situation, especially since he was known to be an influential member of the mafia counsel, a small group of men who ran the city.

“Do you think you need to carry a weapon,” he asked? “I don’t know,” I responded, “I don’t think so, do you?” As he reached into his coat pocket he said, “No! You don’t need a gun, you need one of these.” He pulled out what looked like a credit card made of black onyx and gold and handed it to me. When he did, his assistant gasped. “I will give you one of these,” he said. “If someone walks up to you with a gun and orders you to give him your money, you

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can reach into your pocket and pull this out. When he sees it, he will throw down his gun and run from you in terror.” What he had offered was a card which indicated the highest levels of membership and “protection” among his circle of friends.

At just that moment, one of his aides came into the room and whispered something to him. He turned back to me and said, “I must step away for a moment to deal with an important matter. I will return shortly and we will continue our discussion.” While he was gone, I prayed silently and asked the Lord for wisdom about how to say “no thanks.” There was absolutely no question that if I chose to accept this kind of help, I would be putting my faith in an ungodly man’s organizational power instead of trusting God’s favor. When he returned I knew exactly what I wanted to say. “Mr. Paskevich,” I said, “I want to thank you for all the help you have given me in making my work here in St. Petersburg run smoothly.” “But I have not interfered in your work at all,” he said. “Yes,” I said, “I know that, and I want to sincerely thank you.” At first he looked startled, then, with a twinkle in his eye, laughed a great belly laugh. “Excellent, excellent, no problem, I understand completely. You are quite welcome.”

“As to your very kind offer to give me one of these cards, I have no words to properly express my appreciation for your concern, but with all due respect, I must decline. I am not a serious businessman like you. I am a missionary with a very specific objective, which you well know. I would not want to become a source of difficulty or embarrassment for you with your important colleagues or to do anything that changes the nature of my mission.” He smiled at me in an almost fatherly manner. “You are a good man and, of course, correct. As I think more about it, this would not be a good idea. But you should give no more thought to these men who are bothering you.” I thanked him for the time he had given us and ended the meeting. As we sat silently in the car on our way back to our office, I felt the peaceful Presence of the Lord confirm that He was with us.

Sovereign dependency is a measure of our trust in God’s provision. It is an expression of our faith in Him, personally, and our confidence that He has a plan for us that includes the measure of His power,

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favor, and sustenance we need for each day. And that according to His will and timing He will reveal His purposes about those events that challenge our understanding and test our emotional strength. For “God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). When we depend upon the Lord for our sufficiency, we are secure in every circumstance.

There were far too many ways to be taken advantage of in Russia for a person to depend upon his or her own strength, intelligence, or even the ability to discern good and evil. We knew that without the Lord’s sovereign help, every day could be a crisis. Only He knows how many problems we avoided because of His intervention on our behalf. There were literally dozens of times that we know about, where we stumbled across critical information or were nudged to change a policy or procedure at just the right time. But there were many times when we had no idea that we were being moved around trouble until it had passed. Our covenant with the Lord is so precious, it is essential that we don’t put our faith or trust in any man-made systems or organizations, but to ultimately rely on His ways, means, and grace. Our success was completely related to our trust in the Lord and a simple prayer of faith:

O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.

Nehemiah 1:11

Expect the Lord to Be Your Shepherd

While just a toddler and long before my schoolteacher grandmother taught me the alphabet song, she had me reciting the first verse of the 23rd Psalm. “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” Of course, I didn’t fully comprehend the implications of those words, nor that they would be so meaningful to me almost twenty-five years later when I became a follower of Christ. But Grandma succeeded in her purpose: to instill in me a sense of God’s

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sovereignty and His individual care for us. I almost automatically expected Him to be my shepherd and to take a personal interest in me; even though there were times I didn't quite understand or appreciate His will and purposes. But in this simple declarative statement, King David, who was himself an experienced shepherd, described the love and care that God has for each of us. When the Lord is your shepherd, you shall not "want, lack, or be without what you need" (#2637).

Psychologists and sociologists continue to debate about which human needs are the most important and how they should be met. Although there is no general agreement on such things, A. H. Maslow's "needs hierarchy" (Keith Davis, *Human Behavior at Work*, 1977, pages 42-45) is widely accepted as reasonably portraying the sequence in which humans seek to fulfill their needs. Most psychologists and sociologists fail to recognize God's place in our life so there is no mention whatsoever about relating to Him as a Person, dealing with our sins, or depending upon Him to shepherd us. Maslow's hierarchy categorizes needs only by what humans set out to do by and for ourselves, not by what we are able to accomplish with God's help. However, his insights into human behavior can be helpful in understanding some of our most fundamental thoughts and emotions. The five categories he describes are:

1. Physiological—These are our basic survival needs for things like food, water, rest, etc.
2. Safety and Security—After our physiological needs, we are concerned for our physical safety and assurances that our physiological needs will continue to be met.
3. Belonging, Social Involvement, and Love—These are met at home, at work, and socially with individuals and groups.
4. Esteem and Status—These are often referred to as "self-esteem" or the belief that we have an identity that has value in society.
5. Self-Actualization and Fulfillment—These are about inner motivation and our will to become all that we are capable of becoming.

We all think about these things at one time or another depending upon the kinds of trials and pressures we are experiencing. And most of us can remember a time when we turned to God for help

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even though we were not serving him day to day. I have vivid memories of sitting on a dock looking out over the Indian River wondering how I was going to find work if I lost my job in the Apollo space program, as I knew thousands of us soon would. The personnel cuts had already begun and there were so many people competing for so few jobs that you could find men with advanced engineering degrees working in drug store camera shops just to survive. Engineers were accustomed to transferring to a new project in another city, but there were no new projects. The situation was grim and I was sure that I would have difficulty competing with only an associate's degree. I realized my opportunities might be very limited, and the pressures of providing for my wife and baby boy had caused me to think well beyond the objective of meeting our physiological needs. I had begun to re-consider where I belonged in society, what my identity would become, and what I could do to improve my options.

The more I thought about the facts, the more hopeless my situation seemed to become, at least in my mind. I had sent out dozens of resumes with no results. I felt desperate and about ready to break down and cry. Then, from deep within my soul I could almost hear these words, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." I had already sustained two rather serious collisions with the institutional church and had no intention of ever visiting church again. But at that moment the Lord seemed very close as though He were willing to listen to what I had to say. My prayer went something like this: "I know I haven't gone to church . . ." Before I could explain why I really didn't like what I had seen in church, I felt nudged to skip over all of that, as though the Lord were somehow sympathetic. So I continued, "You know that I will work hard at any job I get. I just pray that You will help me find another job and give me the strength to get through all of this. Please help me. I'll try to do better." As I finished that simple prayer I noticed a very specific release of the tension in my body.

Not knowing what else to do I got up from the dock and started up the path to our mobile home, which was one of about twenty tucked away in a single row behind the home of a retired engineer. Everyone in the heavily wooded park was an engineer or technician

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who worked in one of the programs at Cape Kennedy. Just as I got to our doorway my neighbor pulled into his driveway, waving not as he usually did to say hello, but for me to come over. He excitedly told me that he had just heard a few minutes before leaving work that they were going to hire five engineers in flight crew training. He told me who to call and I went directly to the phone and made an appointment. As I look back upon the calls and interviews I had over the next week, the sovereign hand of the Lord was clearly working on my behalf. I interviewed with the General Manager and he decided on the spot to give me a “physics quiz,” which I passed with flying colors. He didn’t know it, but he had probably asked me the only questions I would have felt competent to answer. With each contact, one detail after another fell to my advantage, shifting the odds to my favor. I got a job as a Lead Systems Engineer in Flight Crew Training (a promotion and a raise) when I thought things were surely going the other way. But God had plans for my life, “plans to give [me] hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).

What’s amazing about all of this is that I still didn’t understand the Lord’s mercy, and that His helpful response was supposed to draw me closer to Him and cause me to want to obey Him above anyone else. I had no concept or model for obeying the Lord and following His commands without involving myself in the processes of the institutional church. The thought of going to church was still very grievous to me. I was a trained observer, and the ethical, moral, and theological inconsistencies I had already seen were more than I was able to reconcile. Although I continued to falter in my devotion to the Lord, two years after God intervened on my behalf with a new job, He did it again. As the aerospace industry continued to contract, I decided to pursue a business career. I had secured employment with an insurance company and was planning to give my notice following an afternoon meeting to finalize our agreement. While I was away at that appointment, seventy-five engineers were terminated, including me.

God seemed to be with me despite my conflict with the institutional church, and as I now understand things, maybe even because of it. The attempts I had made to follow Him were being undermined not only by my own lack of dedication but by the

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incomplete theology and inconsistencies of the institutional settings to which I had been exposed. In some respects my faith had fallen prey to denominational religions that “shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces.” Jesus said, “You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to” (Matthew 23:13). Ultimately every man is responsible before God for his own behaviors. But highlighting the contributory negligence of religious leaders was a common theme of Jesus’ ministry as well as His Apostles. I am certain that I was benefiting from the mercy of God for a number of reasons that are all His own. However, I think one of them was my sincere lack of ability to get in sync with unreliable institutions that kept telling me that they were “the” church.

As I continued in spiritual limbo, I began to deteriorate morally. I could make no sense of the world, and my personal life and marriage were nearing collapse. One morning, after arguing with my wife and ranting at everyone and everything for several days, I awoke to the feeling of the Lord’s Presence. It was as though He were right up in my face saying these words: “Today you must make a choice.” That evening, with the help of my understanding brother-in-law, I finally turned to Christ with all my sins, not just my job requests, etc. This time it was with the full power and Presence of the Holy Spirit in my life. I was so free from oppression when I returned home that my wife actually gasped in astonishment. I had made a permanent connection with the Good Shepherd. I thought the “Spirit-filled” life might have been what was missing in my previous experiences and I’m sure that was a factor. About one thing I am certain: Turning back to the world was no longer an option.

At this point I was even willing to attend church. But to my surprise, I soon discovered some very troubling inconsistencies that exceeded even what I had seen before. I often heard messages with very conflicting spiritual viewpoints from the same pastor. One message would be about the transforming power of faith and how nothing was impossible with God. The other would be a kind of half-hearted, hand-wringing disclaimer about all of the moral and ethical mistakes our leaders made. As I understood the Bible, Jesus wanted to be the Lord of every man, offering each person the same access to His grace. If the leaders really believed in the power of

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God to heal and change, why didn't they practice it in their personal lives the way they were preaching it to us. It seemed to me that it would eliminate the need for all the excuses.

Often one message would be about God's desire to prosper us, while at the next turn the pastors would be pressuring the members to give to their programs so that God could prosper them. I always wondered why, if the leaders really believed in "giving to get" they didn't do more of it themselves. Too much of what I saw and heard just didn't make sense. Even a casual analysis of most people's church experience will reveal the inefficiencies, idealistic delusions, and sincere miscalculations of its leaders. It's not just that things don't always work the way they should, it's worse than that. What I was seeing was a flawed system of organization and theology that undermined real faith and brought people into spiritual bondage. People's hearts were being routinely turned toward the institution instead of to the Lord. Sometimes it was subtle, indirect, and unintended, but at other times it was dangerously self-serving.

My wife and I once attended an ordination service that was chock-full of mysticism and ritual intended to elevate the importance of the pastor and the institution. It was such a confused mixture of faith and idolatry that my wife called out to the Lord for understanding. His response was very helpful. In a sentence He summed up what I had observed for many years but could not describe. "It's not of Me, but I am in it." This startling statement reminds me of what the Lord said in Jeremiah 2:8: "The priests did not ask, 'Where is the Lord?' Those who deal with the law did not know me; the leaders rebelled against me. The prophets prophesied by Baal, following worthless idols." The consequences of these behaviors are described in verse thirteen which says, "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." Too much of what the institutional church has taught us to do just won't hold "living water."

Because He is faithful to us, the Lord invades our rituals trying to draw us back to reality and undivided devotion to Him. The Lord can speak to an errant pastor whose interests have become dominated by his fleshly desires through the words of his own

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sermon, calling him back to sobriety. The Lord can use the reports in a business meeting to rebuke a pastor whose outside interests have dulled his concern for the people he serves. The Lord can also speak to us through the quiet questioning of an elderly person who doubts the wisdom of a program. His voice can be heard in the angry accusations of a congregation stricken by a senseless scandal, or even in the grace of an unexplainable miracle that defies our man-made doctrine. These things expose the frailty and unreliability of our religious routines and how futile it is for both pastor and congregant to remain entangled in them. At some point we must take responsibility for the errors of our ways and give them up.

Have you not brought this on yourselves by forsaking the Lord your God when he led you in the way? Now why go to Egypt to drink water from the Shihor? And why go to Assyria to drink water from the River? Your wickedness will punish you; your backsliding will rebuke you. Consider then and realize how evil and bitter it is for you when you forsake the Lord your God and have no awe of me," declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty.

Jeremiah 2:17-19

I became so frustrated with the institutional church that I had to make a deliberate decision not to allow my disappointment to turn me away from the Lord. I was determined to find out what was really going on and why. I would later discover that the dilemma in which I had found myself was part of God's plan. He was sustaining me and helping me sift through all of the man-made substitutes to find His Kingdom. At the end of the day, it is His love and care that keeps me going. I know this because the Lord is my Shepherd.

Put Your Desires in Perspective

The secular world we live in is preoccupied by the desire to have or control the material things in life. And if, as followers of Christ, we have the same attitude, our prayers will be peppered

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with requests for the things we think are most important for our comfort or enjoyment. When I started attending church services I noticed the strong emphasis placed upon the necessity for each person to pray specifically for their needs. I remember being surprised to hear that the Lord had to be told so much detail, but the teachers said it was a matter of expressing our faith. Their premise was that the Lord expected us to express our faith in prayer or He wouldn't be inclined to do what we needed. However, I kept coming across Scriptures like Matthew 6:7-8, which says, "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." This clearly contradicted the ritual of keeping lists and praying about my needs all the time. And it didn't align well with the idea of a Shepherd who wanted to "make me lie down in green pastures" and "lead me beside quiet waters" (Psalm 23:2).

As I listened to the sermons of some teachers, I began to realize how ineffectively they had researched the systems of faith upon which they were relying. There were often gaping holes in their theology and I was amazed at their willingness to take risks with people's lives. The confidence they exuded about very questionable matters of faith was bewildering. It was a thin veneer compared to the confidence I had seen the astronauts exhibit as they prepared to be strapped into a small spacecraft and propelled into orbit. Most people thought of them as "jet-jockeys" who were fearless about flight. It's true that a lot of them had been test pilots before becoming astronauts, but they were also highly trained engineers and scientists. Their "faith" was based upon an intimate familiarity with the math, science, and testing that had proven the reliability of each technology. They were "morally persuaded of the truth" about their safety. They understood the risks and were always open to anyone who could reasonably question their facts.

It was the lack of openness to critical analysis that bothered me the most about the leaders of the institutional church. They were too often concerned about the wrong things. Instead of being sincerely troubled that someone had a problem of faith that their doctrine could not explain, they would become focused upon

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preventing any “breach of faith” that such a question might bring to their congregations. For instance, someone might ask why when he or she prayed for two people to be healed of the same disease only one had been healed, while the other died. That’s a hard question to answer for someone who believes that it is primarily our faith, not God’s mercy, which brings healing. Being taught to put our faith in “faith” instead of the loving and caring nature of the Lord, might cause a teacher to say something unwise like, “The second man may not have had enough faith,” when they should have simply said they didn’t know and re-examined their doctrine.

As I became aware of various doctrinal questions, I decided to test and prove my faith like a test pilot—strap it on, fly it until it crashes, bail out, think about what happened, make the adjustments, strap it on again, and keep making reasonable adjustments until it flies peacefully without crashing. I would apply the scientific method to my faith and ask the Lord to help me find the truth about each doctrine I tested. It wasn’t long until I had a series of incidents that began to sift and separate the facts in what I believed about God’s provision, even though I sometimes missed what the Lord was trying to tell me. When He would intervene miraculously to make me aware of His shepherding, I would often mistake His involvement as the result of my pressing for a particular outcome. It took several years for me to understand that the Lord was uncovering an error of faith I had learned in the institutional church: I was inadvertently trying to serve God and mammon.

It started out innocently enough as I found myself asking the Lord to help me in situations where no one else could. I had gone through a downturn in my business and for several months we had very little cash. I had maxed out my credit cards and was paying interest-only or a token principal payment until I could get in a position to start paying them off. There simply was no cash to spare and I was trying to work my way out from under what could have easily been a bankruptcy. One day, as I headed toward an afternoon appointment in my little economy car I noticed that the gas tank needle was as far toward empty as it could be. There had been no money and little gas for several days, so I had limited my driving while I waited for a check that was coming. But the check

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did not come and I had to keep producing. As I turned toward the Interstate, I reached out to God for help. I laid my hand on the dashboard and prayed, “Lord, please help extend my miles; I really need to make it to this appointment.” I looked down just in time to see the needle rise up to over half full. I wondered if the float valve might have just been stuck, so when I could finally afford some gas, I rechecked my records and trip meter to make sure. This was not an explainable anomaly. It was a miracle!

Not long after the Lord measured out some free gas for me, we came home to find that our air conditioner wouldn't work. It was a blazing hot summer day and I started checking all of the breakers and switches involved. When I got outside, I could smell the rotten-egg odor of a burnt motor coil, which probably meant the compressor motor was dead. I hit the start switch several times and I could hear the relays close as the engine grunted slightly without starting. With each attempt, the odor of the burning coil increased. As I sat on the ground thinking about what to do, I remembered a sermon I had heard about taking authority over inanimate things in Jesus' name. So I knelt beside the compressor unit, laid my hands on it and said, “In the name of Jesus I command this motor and compressor to be healed. I command it to work in Jesus' name.” I yelled for Dorothy to lower the thermostat. The motor cracked and popped a couple of times and then snapped to life, never again faltering from its duty to supply cool air for my family.

The spiritual environment of the church services and home fellowship group we were attending was one that encouraged practical expressions of faith. When I shared my testimony about these experiences with my pastor and friends, they considered them to be a normal part of my spiritual growth. They told me that it meant I was able to believe God to answer prayers that were previously beyond my faith. So I enthusiastically began a prayer list for my business and family needs. It included outcomes I desired for appointments or meetings that were coming up as well as specifics about the kind of car and house I wanted and the goals I had set for my income. I put a check by each prayer request as it was answered so that my faith would be reinforced every time I looked at my list. There were quite a few items being checked off, but to be honest,

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not as quickly as I had expected. And there were some objectives that hadn't advanced or which had gone quite differently than I had prayed, so my prayer exercises had become both encouraging and perplexing, as I tried to discover more about God's will.

One afternoon, I was visiting a friend from church who excitedly told me about the latest prayer newsletter he had received. It was from a ministry that encouraged people to pray for the body of Christ worldwide. They published a list of strategic needs so that everyone receiving the newsletter could pray. It also had a teaching each month to help us learn more about prayer. "Did you know that the Bible says that God wants us to command Him to meet our needs?" John excitedly asked. I thought he was kidding, but he could not have been more serious. He must have seen the look of unbelief on my face and quickly added "Here it is in Isaiah 45:11. It says, 'Concerning the work of my hands command ye me.' The newsletter says that God wants us to be His operatives on the earth directing His work." John had some pressing business problems so he had decided to "command God to get rid of them." He asked me to pray with him but I was suddenly so fearful that I couldn't. So I stood quietly in his kitchen as he read the Scripture aloud and commanded God to save his business, in Jesus' name.

To be fair, John was naively and ignorantly doing just as he had been instructed. Of course the moment lacked wisdom, because even a casual reading of Isaiah 45:11 in its context would have shown that it actually says just the opposite of what John and the newsletter purported. God was asking a presumptuous people, "Do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands?" The truth is that all of us in that particular faith community had become presumptuous, including me. I had started out humbly asking God to extend my gas miles. And when my damaged air conditioner was restored, it should have brought a sense of awe and security. But the false sense of power it gave me, ignited my desires. Actually there was no principal difference between John's "commanding" and my all-encompassing prayer list. Both of us were trying to control our material world instead of trusting it to the Lord.

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Looking back, it's easy to see that God was using each item on my prayer list to help adjust my perspective on Kingdom life. Some of my prayers "were not of Him, even though He was in them." The only ones that really "worked" were those in the Lord's plan for me at the moment. It took years for me to stop trying to solve every problem with a miracle and realize how specifically God's will was related to each circumstance. I also had to learn how useless it was for me to attempt to set the agenda for when and how my needs would be met. I'm sure I missed a lot of quality time with the Lord because I spent so much time speaking to Him about my priorities instead of listening to what His were. It took ridiculous situations like the one created by the prayer newsletter for me to see how far I had drifted from dependence upon the Lord as my Shepherd. I had come dangerously close to relating to Him primarily as the means for obtaining my desires, whether they were personal, spiritual, or for what we all had falsely believed was the fulcrum of His Kingdom, the institutional church.

In the middle of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, He took time to assure His followers that all of their needs would be met if they humbly trusted and obeyed Him. Matthew chapter six is a wonderful dissertation about God's concern for all of our needs and how foolish it is to be anxious about the things of life when the Lord is your shepherd. He also warned us about the risks of splitting our focus by treasuring or being drawn aside by the desires for the things of this world. In verse twenty-four He said,

No one can serve (#1398, or be the slave of) two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot (#3756 and #1410, there is absolutely no power to enable you to) serve God and mammon (#3126, or cravings, and desires that are deified or personified in money, wealth, or treasure).

The Greek word here translated as "mammon" literally means "avarice" which is a modern English word derived from the Latin for "craving." Jesus was clearly telling us not to be anxious, not to

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crave, not to let the desire for things become our god, and to trust Him to meet all our needs. In Matthew 6:25-33 (NAS) He said,

For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life's span? And why are you anxious about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith? Do not be anxious then, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'With what shall we clothe ourselves?' For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.

One of the most practical ways we can express our faith is to trust the Lord to control both our life's agenda and the economic status and provision He chooses for us. This is especially relevant to the proper stewardship of our gifts and talents. In 1 Thessalonians 4:11, the Apostle Paul said, ". . . make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you. . . ." So why doesn't the institutional church teach this simple approach to life instead of trying to instruct us how to serve God and get what we want? It may be because of its constant emphasis on its own needs. Just like the world, the institutional church is driven by its desires.

Refuse to Rely on the World or Religion

The task before us as followers of Christ is to keep things out of our lives that make us dependent on the systems of the world or religion. In Colossians 2:8, the Apostle Paul said, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles (#4747, or orderly arrangement of the systems) of this world rather than on Christ.” In 1 Corinthians 7:31 he said, that we should “. . . use (#5531, or furnish what is needed through) the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them (#2710, or using them improperly or excessively). For this world in its present form (#4976, and its systems) is passing away.” The ways in which we have become reliant upon the world or religion can be defined by the answers to two questions: 1) Can we receive what is needed for living through a product, service, system, process, or relationship, without becoming dependent upon it as our source instead of Christ? And, 2) can we follow the conviction of the Holy Spirit regarding what the Scriptures require of us for personal holiness, without fear of condemnation from an institution?

Both the world and religion pull at us in very specific ways, but no more powerfully than when they promise to meet our needs. Most people don't like to make repeated decisions and choices regarding their needs, but instead prefer easy access to sources that they can rely upon. This “craving” for dependable sources is the part of human nature upon which both the business world and religion build their constituencies. They know that people are very happy to pay an institution to give them leadership and to do the things for them that they consider mundane or undesirable. When the Israelites said they wanted a king, the prophet Samuel tried to explain to them the severe costs it would bring to them as a nation (1 Samuel 8). But their desire to have a human ruler “to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles” (vs. 20) was so strong that they were willing to pay almost any price (vs. 11-18). They would not listen to Samuel because their hearts had already been turned to “other gods” (vs. 8). When Samuel prayed, the Lord told him: “It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their King” (vs. 6-7).

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In a similar way, the institutional church draws its organizational strength from our desires for security, identity, and belonging. It emphasizes the importance of being loyal to “the church” and further asserts that good people do not judge one another, establishing a deceptively secure environment, free from the kind of effective accountability that would penetrate a man’s entangled motives. In short, the institutional church endorses the authority of man-made doctrines and rituals “having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:5). In Galatians 4:16-17 (NAS), the Apostle Paul said this: “Have I therefore become your enemy by telling you the truth? They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out (#1576, or make you feel excluded), in order that you may seek them.” This same kind of reverse psychology is used by institutions to make people feel like they are missing out on something (and maybe even going to hell) by not being a part of what they are doing. Their doctrines and activities create an “excluded” feeling with which very few people can feel comfortable, causing them to want to do what’s necessary to feel “included.”

I have seen far too many people stray from the path of provision the Lord had for them by holding on to stagnant relationships that made them feel included. As the Lord once said to my wife when she was having difficulty letting go of an institutional relationship, “Hold on to relationships lightly because people have decisions to make.” People who have turned their hearts too much toward either the world or the mandates of religion, sometimes try to squeeze two quarts of God’s will for their life out of a one quart relationship. Whether it is a business, personal, or spiritual relationship, we must recognize that God’s plan for every person includes a diversity of people and circumstances to make us whole. When we begin to hang onto any relationship as though it were our source, its viability and usefulness will diminish. God’s timing and grace mean everything and the relationships that are born of Him never die, they are only transformed as each person moves on to his or her next step of development in the Lord.

Another thing that makes the institutional church appealing to people is the perceived strength of its vertical authority. It usually has an impressive group of men who have established what they

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believe is a Biblical hierarchy headed by a pastor-CEO and ultimately the Lord Himself. People like the idea of being associated with a powerful institution, especially when it gives the impression that its leaders are trustworthy and will bring justice to your life when it's needed. This can be particularly appealing to a man who feels he does not have the communication skills or personal strength to go one on one with lawbreakers, or who does not have direct access to people in authority. It was this kind of situation that allowed Absalom to "steal the hearts of the men of Israel."

He would get up early and stand by the side of the road leading to the city gate. Whenever anyone came with a complaint to be placed before the king for a decision, Absalom would call out to him, "What town are you from?" He would answer, "Your servant is from one of the tribes of Israel." Then Absalom would say to him, "Look, your claims are valid and proper, but there is no representative of the king to hear you." And Absalom would add, "If only I were appointed judge in the land! Then everyone who has a complaint or case could come to me and I would see that he gets justice." Also, whenever anyone approached him to bow down before him, Absalom would reach out his hand, take hold of him and kiss him. Absalom behaved in this way toward all the Israelites who came to the king asking for justice, and so he stole the hearts of the men of Israel.

2 Samuel 15:2-6

When I read those words I can't help but think of some of the pastors I have known. Their words sound so right, and when you consider the enormous size of the congregations they represent, you might feel something is wrong with your thinking to have any questions about their reliability. But besides the fact that it's difficult to find a man with the integrity to keep this kind of promise, if he is part of the institutional church, the promise almost automatically becomes conditional. Sooner or later your loyalty to them and their

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agenda or their doctrines and religious politics will become an issue. And at some point you can expect organizational and cultural pressures to force you to choose between the power of men or God to control your life. The tendency of the institutional church to make good men unreliable was one of the most difficult things for me to understand because of the cloak of goodness that disguises its incredible inconsistencies.

I wanted to make a difference in the church, so I had decided to become a part of the “system.” I gave up my ministry as an itinerant teacher and counselor because the Lord had made it clear to me that he wanted to give me time to improve and deepen my character. The leaders of the church had also expressed their desire for me to come under their authority and work my way through the ranks. As we drove to a fellowship group meeting one night, the Lord spoke to me and said, “Two years from now you will be appointed to the staff of the church.” I didn’t realize at the time the importance of that word of encouragement. But the time would soon come that I would have to know with absolute certainty that He had sent me into the institutional church, and the Lord had mercifully given us a clear word so that we could persevere.

I had already served in almost every volunteer job in the church. Now I was going to start all over again. I thought they wanted to humble me and test my ministry. But as time went on it was clear that they primarily wanted to see if I would be loyal to their system. I became a member of a fellowship group, then a leader, and was active in the weekly men’s prayer breakfast. I soon became a deacon and fellowship group director with several groups and their members under my care. Exactly two years to the day following the Lord’s word to me, I was appointed to the church staff. A few months later, I was hired as a full-time associate pastor, and then ordained as an elder. I had always had some theories about what was right or wrong with the church and had studied its processes as any apprentice who was eagerly trying to please those in authority. But it wasn’t until I was “on-staff” that I really got to see the “inner workings.” To my dismay, I discovered that the processes I had hoped to change and improve were hopelessly entrenched in tradition, politics, and economics that would not budge.

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Barely a year after I became an elder, the pastor decided that a lack of unity in the staff might be holding back a revival he had declared was coming. So he fired one of the most faithful men on staff whom he suspected of being less than enthusiastic about his agenda. Then he called me into his office for a pep talk and it was clear that he was not “asking” me to conform. Instantly, the Lord reminded me of what He had said to me about coming onto the staff and nudged me to speak up. I related the story about how the Lord had brought me to the staff, and said that I would also trust Him to tell me when it was time to leave. I promised the pastor that I would be faithful to my ministry and excused myself from our meeting.

As time passed, the pastor’s religious zeal made it more and more difficult for anyone to perform routine ministry. I was heartsick about how twisted and confused life could be in the institutional church and had to keep reminding myself that the Lord had sent me there. One day, as I was remembering His promise, the Lord spoke to me again. He said, “Prepare yourself to leave here; and never again be dependent on a religious system for your support, or for the right to fulfill your ministry.” Then He gave me this Scripture: “You will not go out in haste, nor will you go as fugitives; for the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard” (Isaiah 52:12 NAS). I really liked the news that we were going to leave what, to me, had become more of a prison than a platform for ministry. It had been very important for me to intimately observe the processes of the institutional church, so that I would never feel insecure without its approval or long for its benefits. But just as surely as the Lord had planned my entrance into church leadership in order to further my education and insights, He had also planned my exit, and there were some things He still wanted to accomplish in and through me before I left.

While I waited, I focused my energy on pastoral care. By the time I left the church, the twelve fellowship groups I had been given to care for had grown to thirty-three. This happened during a period when my colleagues reported their groups were diminishing. It was particularly interesting because I made no effort at all to make my groups grow numerically. My counseling ministry became widely

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recognized and I had trained dozens of volunteers to work in specialized areas of personal ministry, prisons, benevolence, and intercessory prayer. I had initiated a church-wide program to reach the poor and organized adult education programs ranging from advanced Bible studies, to nutrition, and first-aid. My pulpit time, although rare, was very well received and by any reasonable measure my ministry was a success. I mention these things because as they took place, the pastor and board of directors increasingly shunned me for not being unified with them in their misguided plans for church growth. It was part of God's plan to teach me to lean entirely on His grace.

Looking back, I can see that my faithfulness to the ministry God had given me had for many years been mistaken as loyalty to the institution and its leaders. It wasn't until I became a staff member that anyone realized how often I had questioned the ways and means of the things we were doing. It soon became apparent that I was not just along for the ride and my honest questioning was often perceived as disloyal, untrusting, or judgmental. These men did not appreciate the discomfort of having someone question the rules that ordered their world. *Religious institutions are born when people form into groups around the creeds they have conceived to support their particular system of faith.* And they don't like it when people challenge them to revisit the theories and scriptural interpretations upon which their way of life is built.

Our pastor and elders weren't strong enough spiritually to appreciate faithful men. They expected loyalty to their leadership and an unquestioning unity for their plans, and became increasingly frustrated when they could not extract them from me. The fruit of my life and ministry meant little to them in comparison to the value of keeping unified around their "vision." These good men had gradually become so institutionalized that they had unwittingly come to believe in the sanctity of their institution over the will of their heavenly Father, thinking it was the same. They didn't realize it but they had "rejected the law of the Lord and [had] not kept His statutes; their lies also [had] led them astray, those after which their fathers walked" (Amos 2:4 NAS). Our ongoing disagreements reached the point where little was being accomplished in our

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discussions, and they realized that I was not able to come into the kind of unity they required. Finally, they asked me to leave, and we parted peacefully, just as the Lord had promised. Like most people, I had to become convinced of the truth about religion by my experiences inside the institutional church:

Do not seek Bethel (#1008, the house of God), do not go to Gilgal (#1537, the dwelling place of the prophets), do not journey to Beersheba (#884, the well of an oath). For Gilgal (the dwelling place of the prophets) will surely go into exile, and Bethel (the house of God) will be reduced to nothing. Seek the Lord and live. . . .

Amos 5:5-6

Don't Burn inside Because of Evil Doers

I was twelve years old and our neighbor's son, Hank, was home on a weekend pass from "reform school." It was the juvenile prison of our day where violent young men were sent to "mature." Our neighborhood football game, which was usually competitive but peaceful, had been disrupted several times by Hank's bullying, and I had taken the brunt of his attacks. He was sixteen, taller, and heavily built, while I was thin and lanky, so he had a significant size and strength advantage. The game had ended and I was walking toward my home just across the street, when he hurled a final parting obscenity at me. Suddenly, I remembered my Dad's words. I had heard him tell many stories about "country justice" when he was a kid. "If it were me, I'd just pick up a rock and skin his noggin with it." Just then I looked down to see a jagged piece of sewer tile where the repairmen had been working. As I picked it up I noticed that it fit perfectly between my forefinger and the cusp of my hand. I was an all-star center fielder on my little league team and I was known for my rocket arm and pinpoint accuracy. Hank was only about one hundred feet away with the football resting on his shoulder and against his head with his hand on the top. With one motion I pivoted, yelled to get his attention and fired a near perfect strike for his temple. He turned at the last split second causing the lethal

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projectile to arrive with a loud “whack,” hitting the football and barely missing its intended target.

Unharméd, he chased after me and I ran into my house closing and locking the door behind me. It would be years before I realized how narrowly I missed killing Hank and probably ending up in prison myself. Adrenalin was still pulsing through my body and I was gasping for breath, trying to overcome the effects of both fear and anger, when my Dad stepped out of my room into the hallway. “What are you running from?” he asked. He had watched the whole episode from my window. “Nothing,” I said. “Then who’s that out in the front yard yelling for you to come out? Now get out there and whip his butt or I’ll whip yours.” As much as I feared Hank, he was no challenge compared to my Dad, so I burst out the front door like a wild animal. Before Hank knew what was happening, I was all over him. With a blood-curdling scream I attacked, swinging wildly and landing punches with both fists. I was very afraid and very angry, a combination that created a terrifying experience for Hank, who turned and ran for his life.

From that day forward fear and anger played a major role in my life, one that God never intended. I didn’t become violent. I had a couple of fights like most kids, but I didn’t become an aggressor. However, I did develop the tendency to explode with anger in a violently aggressive tirade that usually ended anyone’s fooling around. The people who triggered my rage were always doing something I perceived as unfair or unjust which also touched on one of my fears. If I feared personal loss, rejection, or someone impeding my path to success, my fear quickly turned to anger.

I once had a boss, a retired navy captain, who received an unfair complaint against me from a co-worker whose intent was to deflect attention away from his own malfeasance. My boss spent a lot of unrecorded time away from the office on personal business and my co-worker covered for him. Their reciprocal relationship had been obvious but not particularly bothersome to me until they tried to blind-side me with a false accusation. I’m sure the captain only meant to scare me a little with the threat of the loss of my job, but he really touched the wrong button. I went ballistic and could be heard yelling at him through the entire building as I delivered a

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litany of facts and threats that he could not misunderstand. The captain didn't know it, but the only thing that saved him from a terrific thrashing that day was one of my other great fears, losing my secret security clearance, which would end my career possibilities. So although I came to the very edge of physical violence, I never crossed the line. However, if you were the recipient of that kind of rage, the distinction was insignificant.

There were at least three things that kept reinforcing my bad behavior. First, I kept winning battles against very formidable foes. Each victory caused me to be less afraid to engage the next opponent and I began to regard the explosive power in me as an asset. Second, the people I attacked had usually been so unjust that others who had been victimized by them often commended me for my courage. This made me feel as though I were a white-horsed crusader and stiffened the pride within me. And third, after I became a follower of Christ, I felt so good about myself when I restrained my rage that I failed to recognize the disgust and hatred that was growing in my heart. I felt mature and justified to slowly burn inside instead of erupting in a tirade against evil. But the pressures within me were also evil and indicated my lack of trust in God. I had mistakenly spent my life defending myself when God wanted to do it for me. Even as a follower of Christ, I had not yet fully believed the promises and admonitions of Psalm 37:1-8, which says:

Do not fret (#2734, burn, kindle, glow warm, or become furious with anger, zeal, or jealousy) because of evildoers, be not envious (#7065, or zealously angry) toward wrongdoers. For they will wither quickly like the grass, and fade like the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness (#7462, enjoy the safe pasture of your Shepherd). Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He will do it. And He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your judgment as the noonday. Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for

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Him; do not fret (#2734) because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who carries out wicked schemes. Cease from anger, and forsake wrath (#2534, the fever, venom, or poison, of indignation, hot displeasure, or heated rage); do not fret (#2734), it leads only to evildoing.

I had a lot to repent about and many people to forgive, but I kept getting distracted from God's agenda for my own repentance by the incredible inconsistencies I encountered in the institutional church. I regularly found myself digging for the whole truth about what I had seen or heard because what some people tried to portray as a single error too often represented a lifestyle of scheming and abuse. And it was amazing how reluctant people were to deal with the truth, allowing pastors to escape to another venue and prey on yet another congregation. I did not understand the incredible lack of ethics and accountability people were willing to overlook in their leaders until I began to analyze what was taking place from the viewpoint of religious politics and economics. It was all about preserving the institution.

People's fears that their religion might be discredited by their leader's bad behaviors, or that they would not be able to make the mortgage payment on their new building, often caused them to protect liars, thieves, perverts, and pedophiles with ridiculous cover stories about being called away to this or that ministry. Honestly, it was hard to deal with the anger and disgust I had brought with me into the institutional church because of all the crazy things I saw that re-ignited them. The Lord went to great lengths to keep turning my attention back to my own sins and His Shepherding of my life. But I would barely get refocused on His agenda for me when another bombshell would draw me back to wondering about everyone else. I kept puzzling to discover whether the leaders of the institutional church were practicing deliberate deception or whether good people could possibly be that misguided. It took years for the Lord to convince me how misguided they were in setting their priorities and how that led them into error.

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I had a good friend whose ministry was dramatically and unfairly harmed by some of the same people who had previously covered over the multiple sins of their pastor. Because he had such high regard for the institutional church, he took his wound far too seriously. I tried to help him see that he had been booted into the promise land not out of it, and that the people who had harmed him scarcely knew “their right hand from their left” (Jonah 4:11). But the wounds of the institutional church go deep just like those of a parent, and he never fully recovered. Most men find it more difficult to forgive the institutional church and move on than if a worldly businessman had treated them the same way. They either wrongly believe that they are required to reconcile and get in step with the institutional church or they fret and burn inside naively expecting institutional justice. As King Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 7:9-10 (NAS),

Do not be eager (#926 alarmed, agitated or hasty) in your heart to be angry (#3707, vexed, indignant, wrought, or grieved), for anger (#3707, and provocation) resides in the bosom of fools. Do not say, “Why is it that the former days were better than these?” For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this.

As I began to find logical explanations for all that troubled me about the institutional church, I also found more grace to repent of my own sins and forgive others. But I still had a lot of questions to resolve which unfortunately kept the slow burning of my frustration alive in my soul. I was having a difficult time accepting the fact that I was on solid ground in my fundamental disagreements with the institutional church without allowing their lack of interest in change to ignite the anger in my heart. I found myself having to repeatedly repent until I stopped expecting too much from the institutional church. With all that you might hear about “revival” or “reformation,” the organizational reforms within religious institutions rarely accomplish much more than trying to put new wine back into old wineskins, or to rebuild a slightly modified old

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wineskin with a new commitment to pastoral integrity or some other process detail. They keep missing the point that:

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.

Matthew 9:16-17

It's essential to remember that the institutional church is organized as an economic entity and that its processes are inextricably tied to the idea of congregating a constituency that can pay the bills of the infrastructure and overhead of a system that never really worked. In other words, the things that need to be changed the most are resistant to reform because of people's reluctance to let go of a failed organizational model that undermines the faith they need to follow the Lord as their Shepherd. So to slam your soul against the immovable object of a religious institution attempting to bring reform or revive a dry old wineskin may only produce more fretting and despair. At some point every man should embrace the practical reality of what is called the Serenity Prayer. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

One Saturday morning while I was on vacation, I walked through a quiet Georgia neighborhood praying and thinking about these things. It was a cool overcast day and there was absolutely no one outside as I made my way down a residential street with houses lining both sides. As I approached the end of the street my eyes were drawn to a stand of tall straight pine trees alongside a house. They were all fifty to sixty feet tall and as I approached them one suddenly telescoped to the ground right in front of me. It didn't fall at an angle but fractured into several pieces and fell straight down upon itself into a pile no more than fifteen feet in diameter. As I stood there for a moment in stunned silence, I noticed that the

fallen tree had green needles and mottled bark just like the others. It showed no signs of having been hit by lightning and by all outward appearances had been healthy and sap-filled just like the trees next to it. But in a single moment it had become a pile of rubbish not easily usable even in a fireplace.

Then the Lord spoke to my heart. “The things about the institutional church that have provoked you to fret will eventually collapse just like this tree. Its many schemes are causing it to slowly rot and die from the inside in ways that it has concealed from those who love Me. But after each perpetrator is given many warnings it will suddenly fall under the weight of its own error, no longer able to disguise its sins. Do not fear the institutional church, do not let it grip at your life, and do not allow its sins to anger you and create consequences for you that are avoidable.”

Patiently Grow into Mature Eldership

One of the most misunderstood and abused concepts in the Body of Christ is “spiritual authority.” There are so many opposing denominational viewpoints about how to establish and exercise spiritual authority that it has virtually lost its legitimate function among God’s people. While one denomination rules its congregations by a board of “deacons,” a board of “elders” rules another’s, even though the Bible clearly distinguishes deacons from elders. One denomination might recognize the autonomy of each local fellowship, while another has layers of managing bishops and archbishops to do the job of the “overseer.” While one denomination emphasizes a democratic process as the cornerstone of its authority, another presses each believer to “submit” to the delegated spiritual authority of its theocratic hierarchy. And while one denomination blithely provides third, and fourth opportunities for pastors to rehabilitate their moral failures, and even helps hide them, another is known for “killing its wounded servants,” a euphemism created by adulterous pastors who claimed that their embarrassing “mistakes” received unfair treatment that was too harsh.

In a misguided effort to correct these kinds of constantly surfacing inconsistencies, one local church’s “board of deacons” was replaced by a “board of elders,” with the primary difference being that the new board was comprised of wealthy and influential

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contributors who “understood business.” This was later replaced by a “board of presiding ministry-elders” who “understood ministry” and were all full-time ministers in the church. This was subsequently replaced by a new variation of an elder board intended to reduce the risks of having to confront another “tyrannical pastor-CEO.” Unfortunately, it produced an equally frustrating organizational failure. Each attempt to reform their institution was accompanied by a whole new set of scriptural “proof texts” to support the illogical and at times improbable changes. Until I became a member of an institutional church staff I couldn’t have believed how subjectively spiritual authority was delegated. From the viewpoint of the pew, our pastor’s dissertations about holding to the purity of the Scriptures as a guide for recognizing and delegating spiritual authority sounded really high-minded and noble. But as I began to see more and more disparity in the kinds of men who were being ordained into service, I searched the Scriptures to find some answers.

The source of most of the confusion lies in the widespread misuse of the terms “elder” and “overseer.” An elder (#4245) is “a senior or elderly person advanced in life.” An overseer (#1985, or bishop) is someone who has the responsibility to “inspect, investigate, or supervise.” And although Strong’s says these terms are used interchangeably, they are not synonymous. They are separate descriptors for the same person. Since the age of an older person can vary from century to century and culture to culture, and does not alone indicate emotional or spiritual maturity, the Bible carefully describes the attributes of an overseer in practical terms that require both time and experience. So when Paul wrote to Titus about appointing “elders” (Titus 1:5), he meant “a senior or elderly person, advanced in life,” who could fulfill the other criteria he outlined in verses six through nine. The word “elder” never means anything else, anywhere, ever, at any time, in the New Testament.

In 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Paul outlines the requirements of an “overseer” (#1985), which he distinguishes from a deacon in verses eight through thirteen. It is possible to look at verses one through seven outside the context of “eldership” and make an argument for a young, gifted, man to be an “overseer.” But as soon as you put these verses and others like Titus 1:6-9 in the context of “a senior or elderly person, advanced in life,” the rationalizations of the

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institutional church fail. Notwithstanding, they have regularly chosen older men who don't meet the qualifications, or younger men whose character has not yet been proven over time.

My objective is not to challenge each aspect of the character and experience that Scripture demands of an elder-overseer, but to emphasize that the institutional church has been unrestrained by these requirements in building its organizational structure. In the process it has confused the meaning of the Scriptures and created an impatient, self-serving atmosphere similar to the world, which is unwilling to wait for people or processes to mature. And it has compounded its error by misrepresenting the Scriptures to say that each believer is required to submit to its leadership, often labeling dissenters as "rebels." This condemning theology has enabled the institutional church to hold many men captive to its illegitimate authority. But the requirement for each believer to submit to spiritual authority presumes that we are free to recognize mature elders, with proven ministry, within a Biblically-based relationship. It was not intended to fulfill the arbitrary needs of the institutional church, which itself has no basis in Scripture.

Not long after I was appointed to the staff of my local church, the senior pastor called me into his office to inform me that I was being "made" an elder. He noted that I was carrying significant responsibilities, some exceeding those of men already recognized as elders and that he wanted me to feel "equal" to them. I had been serving as a deacon and had just finished a comprehensive Bible study of eldership. I realized that I was being trusted with important ministries but had decided it was because of my gifting, not my age or experience. I knew that I would (and should) feel insecure being called an elder so I respectfully declined the offer and asked to remain a deacon. To my surprise the pastor was angered by my response and he questioned me at length about my reasoning, none of which he could refute. Actually the more we argued, the more evident it became that not many of my colleagues should have been called elders. Finally I said, "I have one question. How is it that you intend to "make" a young man an old man?" His eyes twinkled a little and then he said firmly, "You are going to be an elder."

The pastor surely didn't want our discussion to spill over into an elders meeting. It would have created chaos, upsetting the order

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of their religious culture. Although I submitted to the new “title,” I knew that it was important for me not to take it to heart. My wife and I agreed to keep remembering that this was an organizational decision, not a scriptural reality, lest we “become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil” (1 Timothy 3:6). The scriptural principles for spiritual authority do not work well within the institutional church and even less so when youthful “elders” skew them off course. When young men’s gifts and talents are captured by the seductive approval of the institutional church, it stifles their natural development, turning their energies to speaking and acting like an elder instead of patiently becoming one.

Spiritual authority begins to take root in the disciplined responses of a young man to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. It is ultimately expressed through the seasoned wisdom of “a senior or elderly person,” who is “advanced in life,” and whose battle-tested reliability and shepherd’s heart assures his fellow believers that our Father’s will is always his first priority. It should be the goal of every man to properly steward his responsibilities and become a dependable voice in the deliberation of spiritual matters. “If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task” (1 Timothy 3:1). What we have failed to realize is that God has set in place a life-long process that allows the full expression of the gifts and talents He has given us as we grow and mature into eldership. An important purpose of the office of deacon is to give men a place to express their spiritual gifts in practical service to the body of Christ. There is no limit to the ministries that a deacon might perform. But like everyone else, he must be willing to subject himself to the spiritual authority of legitimate elder-overseers. As the Apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 5:1-6 (NAS):

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over

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those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.

What the institutional church, its spiritually unqualified older men, and its young unproven overseers lack most is the patience to allow the work of the Holy Spirit to take its course in each man's life until he becomes a mature elder. Patience (#3115) is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) and it is defined as "endurance, constancy, steadfastness, perseverance, forbearance, fortitude, longsuffering, and slowness in avenging wrongs." It is this quality that enables men to delay gratification and wait on the will and timing of God. Every time a man resists following his own will or that of the institutional church and instead obediently submits to God's will, his patience grows stronger. As every real elder-overseer knows, each new test in life provides further evidence of God's sovereign provision and increases their faith. To an elder, patience is the purest form of faith in God; and it is part of his resume, not just his hope for the future. He knows that whether a man is just beginning his walk with Christ or is frustrated by a life mistakenly dedicated to the institutional church, that the Lord is faithful:

He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power. Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly, yet those who wait (#6960, hope, expect, and patiently tarry) for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.

Isaiah 40:29-31 NAS

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Since deacons have virtually the same moral and ethical requirements as an overseer (1 Timothy 3:8-13), it's easy to see how the institutional church, whether deacons or elders rule it, has rationalized around the requirement for an overseer to be "a senior or elderly person advanced in life." But when men begin serving as elder-overseers before they've had time to grow and mature, they often experience a creeping spiritual paralysis that makes them appear indifferent to even the most outrageous errors. After years of unresolved conflict and turmoil they gradually give up their high standards for integrity and wearily go through the motions of oversight.

Men who are growing spiritually and making good decisions eventually fall out of step with the institutional church. It is usually not a conscious or deliberate decision against institutional authority as much as it is a realization that the private decisions they make to obey Christ often put them at odds ethically or morally with practical matters within their congregation. They might even find themselves being held personally accountable by the Lord to a more reasonable standard than the institutional church is willing to follow. By the time most men endure several attempts to reconcile their differences with the institutional church, they begin to recognize that they will have to submit to its leaders and sit quietly, or leave. The institutional church sends a simple message to any man who is listening: "If you want to get along with God, you have to go along with us." Lots of men have been duped by this kind of proud, authoritative use of institutional power. That's one reason why there are so few spiritually mature men in most congregations; men who can be trusted to fairly and justly exercise spiritual authority. But King David said, "How blessed is the man who has made the Lord his trust, and has not turned to the proud, nor to those who lapse into falsehood" (Psalms 40:4 NAS). Again in Psalms 62:1-2 (NAS) he says:

My soul waits in silence (#1747, and with trust) for God only; from Him is my salvation (#3444, deliverance, health, welfare, prosperity, and victory). He only is my rock and my salvation, My stronghold (#4869, defense, refuge and fortress); I shall not be greatly shaken.

Participate in the Restoration of the Church

People often ask me, “What’s the alternative to continuing in the institutional church just the way it is?” I believe the most practical alternative is to become a reliable man of faith and practice who can effectively engage in the work of restoring the church to its New Testament glory. God needs authentic, ethical, morally pure men who can help restore the relational church life we have lost to institutional religion.

When God calls us into His Kingdom, it is first to Himself; second, to one another; and then to take His grace to the world around us. So a vital walk with Christ begins and is sustained in private worship and study, grows and prospers through our ministry to one another; and then produces help for people who are hurting and lost. Our daily goal should be to experience His peace and joy in all that we do. Likewise, the restoration of the corporate church must begin with the development of men with proven spiritual disciplines. Organizationally, we should avoid wrangling about personal preferences or process details. There is little to be gained by tinkering with the order of service or what the worship leader chooses to sing. Instead, we should pursue the root cause issues that have brought the church to where it is today, such as: the Constantine-Luther Pastor-Teacher-CEO form of leadership, the absence of ministry to one another, and the control and use of “the tithe.”

You can start the restoration process by having reasonable conversations with family, friends, and church leaders about your concerns. You’ll be surprised to discover how many people are troubled by the things they’ve seen and heard in the institutional church. But their choice of action will generally fall into one of three categories:

First, some will not see any great need for change or will feel unable to remedy their particular situation, choosing to continue with the familiar routines to which they have grown accustomed.

Second, there will be those who see the problems within their local church as an opportunity for reform and will take action by working within their system to bring improvement.

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Third, there will be those who have tried and failed to bring reform and have gone on to a full, productive, relational church life; meeting in homes or developing new models with “first-century” roots.

Most people do not easily reconsider the value of strongly held beliefs and relationships until what they think or whom they trust causes them to endure pain, disappointment, or failure. So when believers talk about the restoration of the church they may, by necessity, be trying to resolve intense personal issues while at the same time expressing their doubts about institutional matters, thus making the process more difficult. They will also find that some pastors and church leaders are reluctant to engage in an open discussion because they feel obligated to defend themselves or the history and actions of their institutions. Even so, when pastors speak privately to one another, they often describe how they are “burning out” trying to fulfill the impossible agenda the Constantine-Luther model has created for them. It doesn’t work any better for them and their families than it does for us. Over and over again, as one scandal after another wracks the church, each denomination, congregation, or ministry must find a rationale for the sudden disintegration of supposedly great men and their programs. But too many of them are unwilling to consider the possibility that they are trying to do a good thing the wrong way.

One such pastor stands out in my memory. He was one of the most dedicated and sincere young men I have had the opportunity to speak with, and on several occasions I spent some quality time with him discussing the vision he said God had given him. He had set forth what he thought was a great vision for church growth and although there were several parts of his “vision” that were questionable, what most disturbed me was the “aggressive” nature of his “faith.” His sermons and personal explanations of his vision were filled with such bravado that it often sounded like someone who was whistling past the graveyard, terrified by what might happen in the dark cold night, but putting up an impenetrable front of confidence. It took me awhile to realize He was acting. But he wasn’t doing it just to impress others. He actually thought the Lord expected it of him.

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Twice I saw him put down opposition to his plans and with powerful language give the impression he was speaking by the unction of the Holy Spirit. He convinced even the most worried questioners that he had “heard from God” and he repeatedly declared that he would not turn back from “God’s work.” He was doggedly committed to “doing great things for Christ.” But I realized that with the exceptions of the topic and the Scriptures he used to support his position, he sounded just like I had when I verbally attacked the man who had caused me to fear losing my job. His words were sincere, yet misguided, and they were empowered by the wrong spirit. As I began to pray about the situation and ask the Lord for wisdom, He spoke to me through Isaiah 16:14 (NAS) which says, “Within three years, as a hired man would count them, the glory of Moab will be degraded along with all his great population, and his remnant will be very small and impotent.” This pastor was already speaking to a congregation of thousands and had predicted that it would become tens of thousands. Within about three years he had a congregation of four hundred people. During that period of time he declared so many of his ideas to be “of God” that weren’t and so often rejected wise counsel, that he had no real understanding of what went wrong.

The Lord has provided me with many convincing proofs of the spiritual frailty of the institutional church, some of which I have shared on the pages of this book. As I prayed about each new event, I realized the Lord was using men’s failures to open the eyes of His people to two important facts: First, as with the young pastor I just described, it is becoming increasingly difficult to have reasonable conversations with institutional church leaders about the failures of their vision and doctrine. And second, there is a dramatic shortage of reliable men who will challenge the institutional church’s facts. The result is clearly demonstrated by the deteriorating condition of the Christian family, the church, and the world around us.

Some people believe that the church will eventually be reshaped by world events that will cause us to return to our New Testament patterns. If they are right, why shouldn’t we seek the original design now? Why wait for the pressures of the world to direct us to a place we could reach through obedience? In the meantime, there are

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thousands of people in each of our communities who have either rejected the call of Christ or have given up on their walk with Him because of the inconsistencies of the church and its leaders. Now we are hearing about further thousands of strong, dedicated believers who are leaving behind institutional religion to pursue a more reasonable life in Christ. How long can we ignore the obvious? Instead of continually entangling the faith of new or “revived” believers in the suffocating web of institutional life, we should work to restore the ministries of the church to the simple, effective methods described in the Bible. For that, we need reliable men of faith and practice.

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APPENDIX: HISTORICAL SOURCES

The historical facts and dates that appear in various portions of this text are widely accepted for their accuracy by scholars and historians, and/or, can be easily sourced through commonly available libraries and search engines on the Internet. Some original sources are designated by their Internet address such as: lutheranworld.org. For those facts which do not have a specifically designated source (and even for those which do) there are usually several sourcing options from which to choose. For example, there may be multiple books and articles related to a particular question about Martin Luther which can be found using the search format: martin luther AND *the key word(s) from the text*.

At the website, newadvent.org, you can access the Roman Catholic Church encyclopedia and connect with numerous sites and archives, which thoroughly describe the facts related to Constantine's build-up of the institutional church. He is honored for what the Roman Catholic Church believes was a great contribution to their growth and development, including the first church buildings, which historians and archeologists agree did not exist before Constantine. They describe his vision before the battle of Milvian Bridge and many interesting facts about his "conversion" to Christianity and leadership of the church. However, they do not emphasize that he continued to consult pagan gods as his plans for the church developed, and that he waited until his deathbed to be baptized. Fortunately, you can rely on an Internet search engine (yahoo.com, google.com, aol.com, etc.) for these and other very important facts and commentary about Constantine's effect on church life throughout the centuries.

Rather than quote a list of potentially biased or self-serving authors and sources, or the Internet addresses of each and every page I have read; I have chosen to describe my research process and invite you to join it. As you read through sections of the text, pull out key words and place them in your browser's search window. Then you can become morally persuaded of the truth about these facts as a result of your own investigation.

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