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June 2022 “GOLD OR BRASS?”

Dear Friends,

The Apostle Paul wrote the following to the Galatian church,

For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ. (Galatians 1:10)

That verse is a standard for my life, ministry and motives for what I do as a pastor. But it wasn't always that way.

When I recommitted my life to Jesus back in 1981, I made a decision I was no longer going to embrace a fallen-world lifestyle and would instead focus on living for God. In early 1989 I realized God had called me to ministry. On Wednesday, July 12, 1989, I preached my first sermon. The concept I had for my ministry at that time was that I would go to churches, preach for a week, get a big offering and go home. I had absolutely no desire to pastor. But as I continued to pray, I realized I needed to be open to whatever God wanted me to do. So, I told Him I did not want to pastor, but would do so if He wanted. Less than three weeks later, starting on June 1, 1994, I was pastoring in Springboro, Ohio, a southern suburb of Dayton.

Instead of traveling, preaching and getting big offerings, I began envisioning having a huge church with thousands in attendance. There would be lots of programs, ministry groups of all kinds, a gorgeous building, a nice, comfortable office, etc. But instead of meteoric growth, the church seemed to be going nowhere. Oh, don't get me wrong, it did grow...from about 20 to 40. The day came when I realized God was going to take me from that church to another. So, I decided to help Him make it happen and began looking for locations where I could start a church. After several weeks of fruitless searching, I gave up. What I mean is, I stopped trying to do it on my own. I told God, "I know You're going to take me elsewhere, but I want you to know that I am willing to stay right here until Jesus comes back."

For the next two years I focused on feeding the Word of God to that congregation. Then, God began to move in a very unique fashion and on February 21, 1999, I began pastoring the church where I am now. Once again I had the idea that the church would experience accelerated growth, lots of programs, various ministry groups, and so on. But during times of prayer God spoke to me and said, "I didn't call you to build a church. I called you to build people, My Kingdom and to teach those who would receive it." Those words changed my life and ministry. From that time on, I have not been trying to persuade or please men, but to be obedient to God and please Him.

You see, I had been living by the influence of other ministers, pastors, and what I saw in other churches. Those perceptions formed the basis of what I was doing in ministry. I wanted to be like them and have a church like theirs. I wanted to fit in with those who seem to be somewhat among us. I wanted to be accepted in the "inner circles" of well-known, popular pastors and ministers. Thank God all those well-intended, but fleshly desires birthed of pride came to an end.

The influence of all those other pastors and churches had skewed my perspective of the goals God intends for my life and ministry. In essence, I had strayed from what God said through the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:18,

But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.

Instead of pursuing a maturation into the glory of the Lord, I was trying to change into the image of man and the false glory of what I could see with my natural eyes. Success is not based on the admiration and approval of today's church world; it is based on obedience to God. I want my prayers answered, I want to receive from God, and that is not going to happen if I seek for people to pat me on the back and tell me what a good job I'm doing.

And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight. (1 John 3:22)

More than ever in my life, I now recognize how traditions old and new impact the hearts and minds of those in ministry. The desire to fit in and be like those who some believe are the epitome of success has led many to press toward the mark of replicating the works of man rather than toward doing the works of Jesus. *(As I am writing this, the Lord is impressing on me that some of those reading this letter are going to recognize themselves in what God is revealing.)*

When God explained to me that I wasn't called to build a church I felt a huge sense of relief. No longer do I feel the need to "grow my church." No longer do I have any interest whatsoever in attending church growth seminars or reading books on church growth; too many (all?) of those seminars and books focus on human effort, cultural psychology, modern trends, and even compromise to scripture just to get more people in the doors. Do you know what will help get more people in your church? An outpouring of God's presence, glory, anointing and power.

Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it... (Psalm 127:1)

In too many churches, presentation and performance during praise and worship have replaced the pursuit of God's genuine presence and anointing. Many churches now darken the sanctuary during worship, often resulting in an environment that is pretty much identical to secular rock concerts. Sensory stimulation through the use of flashing lights, mirror balls, color-changing spotlights, perfectly timed graphic images on large screens, fog machines and more, actually draw attention to what is happening outwardly instead of what God wants to do inwardly. Can you honestly imagine Jesus telling pastors and worship leaders, "Okay, if you want to worship Me, turn out all but the platform lights and do whatever you can to draw attention to what you're doing instead of what I can do; and don't forget the fog machine so you can imitate the shekinah glory of God,?" Yet, this goes on every week in church after church.

I belong to an online chat group for churches where people share ideas about improving the quality of both audio and video for services. Some of what is shared is very good and identifies very helpful equipment; but some of the input leaves me shaking my head. For example, one person wanted to know how they could keep the mist from their fog machine from rising too high and impacting the voices of the singers or to keep it from spreading into the congregation. My solution (which I didn't post) would be to turn the thing off...God doesn't need that kind of help to touch the lives of people.

What I have noticed is that there are small churches (seating capacity of less than 250) that try to imitate the technological showmanship of larger churches, spending thousands and thousands of dollars on audio and video equipment. I have watched numerous videos of the worship services in large churches. Based on my experience with audio and video, some of those large churches may have spent at least \$500,000 just on the audio and video equipment to achieve the level of production seen online. The Church of Jesus Christ doesn't need Hollywood, it needs holiness, humility, and a genuine move of the Spirit of God.

Another area of tremendous imbalance is the emphasis on education. I find it shocking that so many Christians feel they must graduate from college or have "Doctor" added to their name to feel qualified for ministry. No where in the Bible has God demanded that a person attend a college, university, or seminary before He will use them in ministry. Studying to show yourself approved unto God (2 Timothy 2:15) does not require a college education; it simply requires that you know how to meditate scripture and receive instruction from the Holy Spirit. If you attend a church or are a part of a religious organization that demands a minimum of a Bachelor's degree before you can hold a ministry position or pastor, you are most likely in the wrong place. Consider these passages,

And the Jews marveled, saying, How knoweth this man [Jesus] letters, having never learned? (John 7:15)

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus. (Acts 4:13)

Do you realize that the educational requirements demanded by many denominations and churches today would eliminate Peter, John and Jesus from ministering? That is absolutely appalling! Ministers who demand or expect to be called by "Doctor," or consistently promote that title publicly are steeped in pride. What difference does it make if you have advanced educational degrees...do you truly know the Word of God?

Some might criticize what I'm sharing because of my own education. Yes, it's true that I have a master's degree in Pastoral Ministry and a PhD in Christian Education. But the only reason I attended school for those degrees was because God told me to. The reason He told me to was because He instructed me to open Grace Ministries Bible College. The reason He told me to open Grace Ministries Bible College was because, "if churches were doing what they're supposed to do, GMBC would not exist." Furthermore, you will not find PhD or "Doctor" beside my name on our church sign, business cards, or other church literature. I do not seek man's approval, recognition or status for my ministry.

Along with education, something that means far too much to a lot of Christians is ordination. I find it very interesting how the word "ordained" seems to instantly prove that a person is most assuredly called of God to ministry. I do know that in the United States there are certain legal and tax benefits to being ordained, but rarely ever have I met anyone who knows those benefits. In fact, the government of the United States recognizes ordination for ministry to be very important and expects the ordained person to be actively involved in ministry on a regular basis. Most who ask me about being ordained are seeking status and honor among their family, peers, culture and religion. A piece of paper signed by man does not mean you understand the Word of God well enough to teach it to others.

When it comes to seeking man's approval, recognition, or status, too many ministers – especially pastors – seem to think they must dress a certain way in order to prove they are called of God. I have seen the pictures of pastors wearing apparel that resembles clothing of an Old Testament High Priest: gaudy, outlandish robes, vests, sashes, chasubles, and even mitres (crowns). No, I am not making reference to ministers in the Catholic church, but to individuals in other churches who seem to think God demands such attire. They have been influenced by their peers into feeling approved and recognized as having high rank before God if they wear such eye-catching adornment. I heard one preacher state that the reason ministers dress in such a manner is that they are trying to get the respect from people that they aren't getting from God.

But the LORD said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.

(1 Samuel 16:7)

Don't misunderstand; if you have chosen to be a part of a church or denomination that requires its ministers to wear robes, shirts with special collars, or special suits, then you must comply with those standards. Or, if you happen to be a guest minister where such standards are in place and expected, it is important that you respect those standards. Plus, there is nothing wrong with a man wearing a suit and tie (sometimes called business attire) when he ministers. Yes, it is important to dress decently and respectfully when ministering for the Lord. But the moment a man or woman begins wearing specific clothing for the purpose of proving he or she is called of God, that person has just revealed that they value the recognition of people and culture more than they value the approval of God. Personally, I would rather be clothed in the anointing of God than bathed in the admiration of man.

Some people might think I'm being severely legalistic in all of what I'm sharing, but that is hardly the case. It all goes back to what I mentioned earlier, how traditions old and new have greatly impacted the hearts and minds of people in ministry. Those traditions have molded perceptions, beliefs and behaviors to the point that they essentially become doctrine considered almost equal to scripture. The more the traditions increase as a focus and a goal, the more the pursuit into the image of God's glory and a genuine outpouring of His Spirit will decrease.

²⁵And it came to pass in the fifth year of king Rehoboam, that Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem: ²⁶And he took away the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king's house; he even took away all: and he took away all the shields of gold which Solomon had made. ²⁷And king Rehoboam made in their stead brasen shields, and committed them unto the hands of the chief of the guard, which kept the door of the king's house. ²⁸And it was so, when the king went into the house of the Lord, that the guard bare them, and brought them back into the guard chamber. (1 Kings 14:25-28)

Today's Shishaks and Rehoboams are the pastors who have removed the gold of God's glory and presence from their churches, replacing it with the shiny brass of the traditions and fleshly pursuits of man. Outwardly it looks good and there is much peer adulation, but it is void of the spiritual depth its appearance implies.

If God instructs you to get an advanced degree, then by all means do it; but don't do it just because you think it will make you a better minister or give you status among your peers. If you

are truly in ministry – preferably in full-time ministry – and you need ordination, then get ordained; but if you want ordination to prove to others you’re called of God, you’re operating out of pride. If you’re pastoring a small church, be content and rejoice with great humility that God has entrusted you to feed the sheep of His pasture; keep pressing into His presence and let Him build the church.

There is a remnant of Believers pressing into God to see a mighty, end-time harvest of souls into the Kingdom. Programs, glitz and glitter, professional theatrics, or advanced degrees will not produce an outpouring of God’s Spirit. That outpouring and subsequent revival come as Christians mortify the flesh, turn their backs on the success offered by the world, stop seeking the acclaim and attention of man, and embrace for their lives what John the Baptist said,

He must increase, but I must decrease. (John 3:30)

We must cast down the imaginations that man’s ways, ideas and methods are the keys to a move of God. He has already revealed in scripture what it takes for Believers to be more Christ-like and do the works of Jesus. God’s way will never fail, and the results are always perfectly aligned with His will. He wants to work on us, in us and through us to demonstrate His glory, anointing, power, love, mercy and truth. If we truly seek Him, we will find all that He is and experience His fulness. Praise His Holy Name!

In His Grace,



P.s. – This month I’m offering a special sermon that accompanies this letter. The title is, *Are You Worshiping a Golden Calf?* I preached it during a ministry trip in New Zealand and I believe you’ll find it to be a great blessing. Use the form below to order a CD of the sermon.

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