

HISTORY 14

It was the spring of 1978, and we were busy planning the Cathedral of St. Philip fundraising campaign that would take place in the fall. The chairman asked me if I would give a five-minute stewardship testimony in the main Sunday morning service. But of course I would—it was six months away. I would agree to a lot of things that were that far distant. I didn't start to panic until the date was within a couple of months. I started writing my stewardship testimony before I realized that I didn't have a stewardship testimony. I didn't think I could fill the five minutes by saying that I tithe because my mom told me to. I had to become a serious student of the biblical mandate for the tithe.

Keep in mind that this was before we wrote letters on the computer. I dictated so many versions of my speech that the lady in the office who typed our letters was close to pulling her hair out. By the time the final version was finished, she told me that she felt qualified to teach about giving.

I had only spoken in front of a crowd once before, and it was on a Monday night at the Cathedral. There was renewal happening and Dr. Paul Walker, who was the pastor of Mt. Paran Church of God, was scheduled to be the guest speaker at Monday night prayer and praise. Paul and I had become close friends, so David Collins, dean of the Cathedral, asked me to introduce Dr. Walker. I told David that I hadn't done anything like that before, and he said; "Just do it the way you make announcements on the airplane. You're speaking to a crowd there."

I shared with the congregation that I was not a public speaker and that I had told Dean Collins and Canon Bruce Shortell as much when they recruited me to introduce Dr. Walker. I said, "They told me, 'Just do it the way you speak to your passengers.' So here goes. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard Delta for our flight this evening. We are expecting ..." The laughter from the audience relaxed me enough so that I probably did a credible job of introducing Paul.

But this stewardship testimony was different. There would be around 1,200 people there, and I was talking about a subject that lots of pastors are afraid to preach about. Canon Forest Mobley was my point man, and he told me that he had never seen knees shake as much as mine were while I was speaking. My talk was typed in all large caps so I could see easily without reading glasses. The problem was that I didn't read anything from the paper that I had labored over for so long. I didn't remember what I said, but it lasted five minutes, and several people told me it was good. I do remember that as I spoke, I was terrified that I would use bad grammar, wrong syntax, or something that would put me in a corner that I couldn't get out of.

I told Delta pilot Bob Snelling about the talk, and he invited me to speak about stewardship at the First Presbyterian Church in Douglasville on a Sunday night. They

were starting their campaign with Bob Fenn as the guest preacher, and I could talk for five or ten minutes before he did. Bob Fenn owned five men's clothing stores in Dallas in the 1960s. He started a men's Bible study that God blessed. Coach Tom Landry of Dallas Cowboys fame was one of the regular attendees. God called Bob out of the clothing business, and into the soul-saving business. He sold his stores, and joined the board of the Covenant Fellowship of Presbyterians. He had become the director and was leading teams of lay people in church-renewal programs by the time we met in Douglasville.

Bob's home church was Central Presbyterian in Clayton, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. Washington University's Barnes Jewish Hospital is next door. I only mention that because when Bob invited my wife Joan and me to give our testimonies at Central Pres on a summer Sunday night, I didn't know that in a just few years my daughter and son-in-law would be doing their medical residences at Barnes, and we would be regular St. Louis visitors.

Central Presbyterian received a gift of a lovely old home on several acres in downtown Clayton a few years before we were there. It had lots of family recreation facilities, and their summer Sunday evening service took place outdoors after games and a picnic dinner. As I recall, there were at least 200 people there, and I was introduced as the main speaker. By this time, I had been a Christian for a couple of years, and I had given my testimony several times—enough so that my knees were no longer shaking. At the end, we gave an invitation, and several people accepted Christ. A few years later, Bob was doing some consulting for us on the care and feeding of new churches, and I met him for lunch in Atlanta. He told me that he had run into a TWA captain at Lambert Field on his way out of St. Louis that morning, and asked him how he was doing. He replied; "Bob, I've been doing great ever since you brought that crazy Delta pilot and his wife to St. Louis and got me saved."

On another occasion, God let us know something we had done bore fruit. Dean David Collins and his wife Ginny were leading teams of lay people to bring renewal to Episcopal churches. Bob Willingham was an orthopedic surgeon in Atlanta. Along with his wife Anne, Bob, my wife Joan and I were on a team with David and Ginny that spent three evenings in an Episcopal church in Brunswick, Georgia. At the conclusion of David's sermon the first night, he invited the congregation to come to the front and pray with the three prayer teams. He introduced the Willingham's on his right and the Hall's on his left. People lined up in front of each team, and it was like an invisible hand directed people who were looking for physical healing to Dr. Willingham and his wife, those seeking emotional healing to the Collins, and those who wanted to accept Christ to us. We even prayed the sinner's prayer with a Catholic priest, and I was feeling a "small" amount of spiritual pride as the last lady in our line brought her young daughter to us. She asked us to pray that her daughter would be healed of epileptic seizures. I

suggested that Dr. Willingham probably had the gift of healing, and I thought he should pray for her little girl. But I looked to the side and saw that he still had several people lined up. Then Joan grabbed me by the arm, rather forcefully, and whispered that the little girl thought we were all crazy and that we needed to pray for her immediately. We did, but I can't say that I prayed a prayer of faith. I was on a high from the results we could see—the number of people who had accepted Jesus.

A few years later, I received a telephone call from my mother, and her excitement then made up for her lack of excitement on the night I gave her the news of my salvation. She had been visiting my cousin Eileen Smith in Sandy Springs that day. Eileen and her husband had a basement apartment in their home that they rented to a number of students through the years. While mom and dad were there that day, a man from Rome, Georgia who had been one of those renters dropped by to say hello. He had his wife with him, and while they were making small talk about families, etc., the wife suddenly and excitedly said; “Your son is the Delta pilot Gene Hall and his wife is Joan, and they are members of the Cathedral of St. Philip.” I think mom was a little taken aback, and she was probably wondering what awful thing I had done for these strangers to know me. Nevertheless, she confessed, and the lady said; “Our daughter suffered from frequent epileptic seizures. Your son and daughter-in-law prayed for her in Brunswick and she was healed. She has never had another seizure.” Not only is God awesome, but He is kind, He is considerate, and He is thoughtful. He let us know that our prayer bore fruit, and He honored my mom and dad.

Another incident involving prayer still stands out in my mind. David Collins called me one afternoon and said Francis MacNutt had called him from Jacksonville. He asked him to pray with a girl who was in her early 20s. She had been involved with a witch in another city before recently moving to Atlanta with her mother and father. She was experiencing some demonic problems. Francis is a former Catholic priest who has been involved in healing and deliverance ministries for many years. You can “google” him and get his biographical information if you are interested. David said he had asked Bob and Anne Willingham to be part of the prayer team, and he invited Joan and me to participate. When I think of the events of that night, I often think of one of the most famous lines in movie history, Prissy to Scarlett O’Hara, “Lawsy, I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout birthin’ babies.” I suspect that Prissy knew more about “birthin’ babies” than Joan and I knew about deliverance prayer.

The Cathedral of St. Philip has two chapels. One is on the main level, across the narthex from the main sanctuary, and the other is in the basement. We scheduled the prayer session in the basement chapel and told the mother, father and daughter that we would go with the young woman to the chapel and have the parents wait in the bride’s room for us. The bride’s room is also in the basement and is a very well-appointed, comfortable sitting/dressing room. All is well, and we start the prayer session. But once

again, I don't know when to keep my big mouth shut. It occurs to me that the mother and father are alone, and maybe, rather than leaving them alone, someone should pray with them. I suggested it to David, thinking that he would send the Willingham's, the "more experienced" Christians there. He liked the idea and told Joan and me to handle that— not what I had in mind. It was only minor panic as we obediently made our way to the bride's room.

We told the mom and dad that we would like to pray with them while their daughter was being prayed for, and they quickly accepted. The dad left the room so we could pray with his wife first. They were a very attractive couple in their mid-50s. He was a successful professional, and she was a demure, white-haired, soft spoken, homemaker. We didn't know what we were doing, or exactly what we were going to pray for, so I did most of the talking. I asked her if she had ever made a decision for Jesus. She said that she had and recently rededicated her life to Christ. We told her that was great, but we always liked to start by praying the sinner's prayer. It was for us as well as her.

We had barely started when she was on her knees baying like a wolf. Then she went flat on her belly and was hissing like a snake. Her face contorted as blood-curdling shrieks rose up from deep within her. I knew the deliverance session was supposed to be happening in the chapel. (It was.) I don't think I have ever been any calmer in my life as Joan and I called those unnamed demons out of that woman in the name of Jesus.

In the middle of the session, I laughed as the thought of what most of our Buckhead friends would say had they witnessed this. We had never experienced anything like it, yet God directed us as we did His work in obedience. It was over as quickly as it started, and she had no recollection that this had been anything more than a few words of prayer as she thanked us for praying with her. Her transformation back to "seeming normal" was as dramatic as the one we saw at the beginning of the session. We were ready for "whatever" as we began praying with her husband, but our time with him was uneventful.

I have heard it said that one of the most dangerous places in America on Sunday morning is the average church parking lot, particularly one with an inadequate number of spaces. That may be an exaggeration, but being the chairman of the Cathedral of St. Philip parking committee during my first year on the chapter taught me a lot about people. The parking job was generally given to the least successful, least prestigious, least spiritually mature, etc. of the freshman class. I was amazed at the large number of men who sought me out to tell me they would like to be more involved in the church and would be happy to help in any way. But when I told them we needed help on the parking committee, most reacted with a look of horror as they quickly withdrew. I found it to be somewhat amusing that I had no problem enlisting men who were very successful in

their careers. Two of my most reliable volunteers were senior partners in one of the largest law firms in Atlanta, and another was a bank president.

The 70s and 80s were exciting times for Christians in Atlanta. Joan and I lived across the street from Mount Paran Church of God, which seemed to be playing a major role in the revival that was going on in Atlanta. Their pastor, Paul Walker, and I had become close friends before I ever had attended a service there. Many people have since told me that they learned to worship by going to Mount Paran on Sunday night. Hundreds, if not thousands, did and took it back to their home churches.

Meanwhile, Monday night prayer and praise was going strong at the Cathedral. Many of us naively thought nationwide Episcopal renewal was about to happen. We were able to attract top-notch preachers and teachers from numerous denominations. One of the most significant and unforgettable was Dennis Bennett, who along with his wife Rita ministered to the "Monday Nighters" more than once. Dennis passed away in 1991, but Rita is still ministering. His bio is from her website:

"Father Dennis Bennett was the Episcopal priest who verbally fired the shot that was heard around the world. On April 3, 1960, he spoke from his pulpit at the thriving St. Mark's Church, Van Nuys, California and shared with his congregation that he had received a personal Pentecost or Baptism with the Spirit. And as with the original Pentecost in Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years before, scripture says, "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:4 NKJV).

Now Dennis shared that he, and then many of his congregation, had this empowering experience. This was his flock and he wanted them to know that God had more in store for them. So he told them—to his own disadvantage.

As the saying goes, "Sometimes the devil comes to church on Sunday." Truly the warfare between good and evil began at those three Sunday-morning services, escalating as the morning went on. Dennis was asked to resign by some of the vestry, and not being used to such heavy spiritual battles at church, he decided that his experience was too valuable to fight over. As rector and chief pastor, he did not have to resign but decided it was the best action to take.

After this explosion in his church, the story was carried in the local newspapers. After various wire services picked it up, the news swept the country. Dennis was not a person who sought the public eye, and in fact,

he did not enjoy it. But there was no way to escape it, especially when Time magazine carried the story, and then Newsweek.

A short time later, Dennis left Van Nuys to pastor a church in the Northwest—St. Luke's in Seattle. He, his wife and three children accepted the call and began a new life with a new, loving congregation. A few years later, in 1963, his beloved wife Elberta died. He dedicated his book *Nine O'Clock in the Morning* to her, calling his wife "one of God's great ones and a true soldier of Christ."

It has been said by many that Dennis Bennett "fathered" charismatic renewal in mainline churches. On one of Dennis and Rita's visit to the Cathedral, they did a two-night seminar on inner healing prayer. Dr. Charles Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church Atlanta, had dinner at our home the first night and attended both sessions. We were talking about revival over dinner, and Dr. Stanley made a statement that has stuck with me all these years. He said, "My people have sat in the seats of salvation too long, and that is going to change." It took me a few minutes to fully comprehend what he had said. Then I remembered the "Gospel 101" sermons that I heard every week in the 40s and 50s in the small town Baptist churches where I grew up. We got "saved" every Sunday, but we didn't grow much. Our visits with Dennis made a huge difference in our prayer lives. I enjoyed one-on-one time with him because he loved airplanes, and we were both excited that I was able to let him try his hand at flying the Delta 727 simulator.

As I look back, I think the main reason many of us thought revival was going to happen in the Episcopal Church was the amount of renewal that was happening at St. Philip's. We not only had Monday night, we had at least three adult Sunday-school teachers who were telling the truth.

Joe Spence was one of those. He was a banker who wanted good teaching, and he went to Dean David Collins to complain about the lack of it. As I mentioned earlier, David was known for telling you to take care of whatever was lacking or needed fixing that you "complained" about. He told Joe that if he was not satisfied with the teachers, then he should start teaching a class. Joe did, and he was good at it. Joan and I were having lunch at the Christian Broadcasting Network during a Pat Robertson-led seminar. There were about 100 people there from all over the country, and we were at tables of eight. We were introducing ourselves around the table about towns, churches, families, etc. In those days, Joan and I attended a number of nondenominational meetings and didn't normally emphasize our membership in the Episcopal Church. It generally brought lots of blank stares or questions like, "Why?"

One fellow at our table was from Roswell, Georgia, and of course, he wanted to know where we worshipped in Atlanta. We told him, and he said; “I was saved at the Cathedral of St. Philip.” I don’t know how long I was unconscious, but after I regained my senses, I asked him how. “In Joe Spence’s Sunday school class,” he explained.

Later, we had Ken Boa and Michael Youssef teaching. Michael was managing director of the Haggai Institute and was a non-stipendiary (on staff, in the rota, unpaid) priest at the Cathedral. More about him and The Church of The Apostles later. Dr. Ken Boa is a teacher and author with doctorates from New York University and Oxford. Ken probably had an average of 50 to 60 doctors, lawyers, Indian chiefs, and their wives—some of whom were also doctors, lawyers, and Indian chiefs—attending his class. In other words, just your average Buckhead crowd.

One Sunday afternoon, I had been out of the house for a little while. And when I came in Joan said, “Ken Boa called, and he’ll be in New Orleans next weekend teaching a ‘Walk Thru the Bible’ seminar. And he wants you to teach his class.”

My reply: “No way.”

Her: “Why?”

Me: “Well, I barely graduated from Elizabethton High. He has two doctorates ... blah, blah, blah.”

Her, after a dramatic pause: “That really surprises me.”

Me: “Why?”

Her: “Because after what God has done in your life, and the life of our family, I would think you would want to shout it from the housetops every time you had the chance.”

The woman fights dirty. She had me. Joan went on to tell me that Melody Martini would take the first half of the class to review the book *How Do You Say I Love You* by Judson Swihart, and I would only need to teach 20 to 25 minutes.

I suppose it was coincidental that she happened to have a copy of the book when I said I needed to read it so there might be some connection between the two speakers. I was flying out the next day and told her I would read the book on my layover. Well, I did, and it changed my life. I called Joan and through tears begged her forgiveness for the jerk I had been—**not before I came to Christ, but since I had come to Christ**. I told her that I could weave that book into my testimony for the class. She said that was good since “Melody has been called out of town, and you will be doing the whole hour.”

The book is about people speaking different love languages. The author talks about a boy going into a shop in Alsace-Lorraine and is captivated by the most beautiful girl he has ever seen. They are in the part of France that is sometimes German, depending on

which country won the last war. He is excited as he goes to talk with her, but the boy finds that she only speaks French and they can't connect because he speaks only German.

One chapter is about a young couple who are just starting out. He only has three dress shirts, so she washes and irons them frequently. One day, he plans on wearing the blue, but only the white one is ironed. He is disappointed and thinks if his wife really loved him, she would have the blue one ready. Meanwhile, she is thinking that even though exhausted from caring for a sick child, cooking, and entertaining his parents who are visiting, she has shown her husband how much she loves him by staying up late to iron his shirt.

I got the class's attention by telling them what a jackass I was before I accepted Christ, and how it took this book to show me that all I am now is a redeemed jackass. There were several very successful men in the class that day, and a couple of them told me after it was over that a particular chapter had convicted them. In the book, a man convinces himself that he works 80 hours a week for his family. But his wife and children are thinking that if he loved them, he would spend more time with them. He was working 80 hours a week for himself, not his family.

The word had gotten out that there was a lay person in the Episcopal Church willing to talk about giving from a Biblical perspective—even to the point of showing proof that tithing was New Testament as well as Old Testament. Matthew 23:23-24 says, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. **You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.** You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." (NIV).

I was being invited to preach on stewardship in churches from South Carolina to Colorado and a few in between. Sometimes, the rector would tell me that teaching stewardship in his church would be like trying to teach a child algebra before he learned to add and subtract. In those cases, I had the "Gospel 101" to fall back on. One Saturday night, I was having dinner with a rector before speaking in his church the next morning. A seminary graduate, he told me that he was born again but didn't have a clue about how to lead someone to Christ. After the service the next morning, he stood before the congregation and said, "Everything Gene has told you this morning is true, I am going to ask you to stay in your seats rather than going to your Sunday school classes, and you can ask Gene questions." One man asked why no one in the

Episcopal Church had ever told him about being born again. He always thought that was mostly for Baptists. "You blind guides!"

Lots of exciting things were happening. I was being invited to give my testimony, and teach stewardship, but Joan was "in the trenches" praying with and ministering to women. She and Ginny Collins led a seminar called "Renewing Love" several times, and it bore good fruit. A prominent lawyer and his wife were on the verge of divorce, and he began to notice a change in his wife's attitude. She was different, not combative. He was curious and asked her what had happened. She explained that she had been going to this "Renewing Love" seminar at church and had given her life to Christ. He said that if that was the reason for the change in her, then he wanted to give his life to Christ and change too. He did, and he did.

My friend, Dr. Paul Walker was pastor of Mount Paran Church of God. Paul is a godly man, but he was not always a good influence. Sometimes, I'm too easily influenced. It was New Year's Day in 1983, and Paul and I were skiing together at Beaver Creek, Colorado. The Georgia Bulldogs would be playing Penn State in the Sugar Bowl later that day. So our plan was to cruise a few blues in the morning, have a leisurely lunch, and then watch the game. Georgia had beaten the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame in the 1981 Sugar Bowl for the national championship. They lost to Pittsburgh in the 1982 Sugar on a desperation fourth-down Dan Marino pass. The "Dawgs" were ranked number one in the nation, and favored to beat the Nittany Lions for another national championship.

I had only started skiing the year before, and I worked with a private instructor for 10 days the first time out. So I was comfortable skiing blues by now, and this was my first (of many) ski trips with Paul. What I didn't know was that he took on the personality of some other strange persona as soon as he clipped on his skis. I think he had some sort of Jean-Claude Killy complex or something. At this point, I didn't know that he skied on the edge of eternity. He never saw a mountain or mogul that was too big for him, and he has a record of broken bones to prove it. The black diamond slope next to the home of former President Gerald Ford was closed, but I am sure that Paul thought it was off limits to everyone but us as he waved at me to follow him. I wiped out halfway down the mountain but was able to get to the bottom before my knee started swelling. Yeah, and the Bulldogs lost to Penn State.

We flew to Atlanta the next day, and I was in a wheelchair. I had to sit on the side of the bed and pick my leg up with both hands to lie down. Monday morning, I collected my crutches and went to see orthopedic surgeon Dr. Bill Bondurant, who was an old friend. His daughters were in school with my girls, and Joan is godmother to his youngest. Bill

quickly determined that the injury was too serious for arthroscopic surgery, and he would need to open the knee. He scheduled the procedure for two days later.

We had a meeting that night at the Cathedral to decide the budget for 1983. I was responsible for presenting about three sections of it. Moving was difficult. My knee was the size of a small watermelon, but it didn't hurt that bad as long as I didn't move. The budget committee let me present first because a Monday night prayer and praise planning session was going on down the hall, and I told them I wanted to get the church work out of the way, so I could go let that group do the work of the church and pray for my healing. Dean David Collins was leading a group of about 20. Joan, the Willinghams and Andy and Francis Huber were among them. It was a nice time of prayer, but nothing happened. Joan and I went home, and I went through the same drill to get in bed, sit on the edge, pick my left leg up with my hands, turn sideways and lie down.

The next afternoon, it occurred to me that Paul Walker had not prayed for me. I called his office, and he said he would be glad to do that. Dr. Walker said he would stop by on the way home, either that day or the next. I said, "Paul, I'm scheduled for surgery tomorrow, I want you to come over and pray for me." He answered; "Oh, you want me to come over there now." My answer was: "Now or soon." Dr. Walker was there within the hour, and he anointed me with oil and prayed.

That night, I went through the same drill to pick my leg up and get in bed. A little after midnight, I dreamed that my leg was healed. I woke up groggily and bent it, and the knee seemed okay. I went right back to sleep, and I dreamed again that someone was telling me to get up and walk on it. It was almost like I was still in a dream as I got out of bed and walked into the bathroom. The swelling and pain were gone. I could bend it and put all my weight on it, so I went back to bed and immediately drifted back to sleep. When I woke up the next morning, I checked everything again to make sure I wasn't dreaming. I called crew schedule to reinstate the PBI trip that I had dropped for Thursday.

I kept my afternoon appointment with Dr. Bondurant, and he couldn't believe what had happened with my knee. He said he had never seen anything like it in 40 years of medicine and that I was "lucky". I told him about the prayer sessions, and he just shook his head. The next day, Bill's wife called Joan to invite us to dinner because she wanted to hear the story from me. We couldn't accept because I was flying my trip. Joan told her that I was playing golf in West Palm Beach. I ran three miles after playing golf that day.

In 1984, David Collins retired as dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip. I was one of 13 on a committee charged with finding a new dean. I was still naïve enough to think there was hope that a church blessing same-sex marriage and ordaining gays, among other things, could be salvaged. We worked for 19 months before calling a new dean who happened to be a Universalist. The committee was split with six evangelicals and seven traditionalists. We started that way, and finished that way. The process was well into the second year before the bishop let me know he would not accept an evangelical.

Joan and I had started giving modestly to Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network. The late Bob Slosser was President of CBN and was passing through Atlanta, so I invited him to dinner. I mentioned it to a close friend, who said that he and his wife would like to meet Bob. So the five of us met for dinner. The next day, they made a \$1,000,000 gift to CBN University.

Pat had announced that he was running for president, and he sent an emissary to ask if I would organize and chair a fundraising dinner for him in Atlanta. I told Pat I would do it only if he told me in person that he wasn't running for president because he was still mad at Jimmy Carter. I don't know that he ever was mad at Carter. But I was told by "insiders" that Carter had led Pat to believe that he would have influence as far as getting godly appointments, etc. and had reneged.

We arranged a lunch meeting in a private dining room at Commander's Palace in New Orleans. The Church of The Apostles was up and running, and Michael Youssef went with me to meet Pat. I asked Pat if his running had anything to do with Carter, or had God told him to run. He said, "Gene, God didn't tell me to run for president, God told me to be the president." I think Pat was 57 at the time, and he went on to tell us how God had blessed the ministry and how good his life was with his new horse and home. Conversely, he explained how bad it was to lose your ability even to go to the corner store without the Secret Service. I was convinced, and our dinner for 1200 at the Marriott in downtown Atlanta would raise \$220,000.00 for his campaign.

Shortly thereafter, I became part of CBN University's Board of Regents. I only stayed a year because it was the early days of Apostles, and I decided to get off all non-profit boards except those related to the church. At my last board meeting, we were wrestling with a name change for CBN University. Some wanted to call it Robertson U., but Pat wisely nixed that. A week or so later, Bob Slosser called me and said the board had settled on a new name. It was Regent University. He asked if I could guess who came up with the name, and I couldn't. He said: "You did, you donkey. God can still speak through a jackass." In that final meeting, I jokingly suggested that if Pat didn't want to be honored, we could honor ourselves by calling it Regent University. Dee Jeepsen was

chairperson of the Board of Regents, and she laughed along with everyone else. But when she got home, the name kept coming into her thoughts. A regent is one who manages property for a king. In this case, it was the King of kings.

My family was blessed mightily by the ministry of Pat Robertson. He had surprised the media by his strong showing in the primary in Iowa, but Jimmy Swaggart had fallen. The media was giving TV ministers a hard time, and they were referring to Pat as a “TV evangelist.” Pat said that he didn’t fall into that category as he was a “religious broadcaster” and talk show host. He later renounced his ordination. I have never heard Pat say anything about God, prayer, or the devil that I thought was untrue. I have heard him say lots of things that I didn’t think were helpful, at least from a timing standpoint. My mom always said; “God’s ways are not your ways. Don’t criticize God’s anointed.” I have found that I don’t need to criticize God’s anointed because there are many non-believers, as well as believers, to handle that.

But back to 1986 and the beginning of the highlight of my walk with God. I had refused to make the calling of the new dean unanimous. It had taken me a long time to realize that compromise with people who think infant baptism gets a person into the kingdom and most religions are no more than “different roads to the same destination” was hopeless. In the fall of that year, Michael Youssef and I had a brief conversation at church. I had been in a Sunday school one time when Michael had taught, and had heard him preach two or three times. I knew he was rock solid. But he spoke with an Egyptian accent, and I always missed some of what he said from the pulpit—mainly because the acoustics were awful. I didn’t know him or the Haggai Institute very well. I, along with many others, were drifting somewhat and discouraged by the calling of the new dean who was most certainly a Universalist That Sunday, Michael told me that he would like to get to know me better. I had heard rumors that he was being encouraged to start a new Episcopal church, so I eagerly accepted his invitation to have lunch at Ray’s on the Chattahoochee River in North Atlanta the following week.

We had ordered lunch and were making small talk when I mentioned something regarding the “communist menace”. Michael quickly told me that militant Islam had supplanted communism as the major threat to the free world. He had written the book “Black Gold and Holy War” three years before under the pseudonym Ishak Ibrahim. Michael revised and updated the book after the 1991 Gulf War, and again after September 11, both of these under his own name. I had never heard of the Islam Brotherhood, or the Wahabi sect. In fact, Jihad was a word I was not familiar with. Michael had outlined Islam’s plans to conquer the West in his book. After reading it, I understood why he had published anonymously. He had audiences with senators and cabinet-level officials of the Reagan administration. They didn’t disbelieve what he was

saying. They just knew it could not be “sold” politically. It has now been 27 years since the first publication, and his predictions (I think they were prophecies) are being fulfilled. There is no doubt about their plans, and it’s still hard to “sell” in our politically correct society.

He disclosed the vision that God had given him for a new church in Vinings/Buckhead that day. He saw a church that was on a hill, either next to a main highway or a river. He wasn’t sure which. The sanctuary would seat 3,000, and there would be a ministry from there that would have a worldwide effect. People would come there to learn worship and prayer and music and ... (The church started at a school on a hill next to the Chattahoochee River and later moved to new property on a hill next to Interstate 75.)

I remember thinking, *A 3,000-seat building for an Episcopal church. Wow! That’s probably impossible, but you can’t put God in a box. It sure would be exciting if it happened.* Dr. Youssef gave me permission to share his vision with Joan. He was not telling very many people—most of them would have thought he was a little off to say the least. The Episcopal Church had not sunk to the depths that it is now, but it was already spiritually off and losing members at a rapid rate. Michael already had a job that a sensible secular mind (and probably most Christians) would say was better than starting a new Episcopal church. He was the chief operating officer of the Haggai Institute. From a prestige, pay or impact standpoint, a church would need to be pretty large to equal what he was doing. In addition, he had four children who were probably going to be educated in Atlanta private schools (they were) and then go on to college. I added up the price of putting our two girls through four years of college and told Joan that I was glad God had called Michael for this job and not me.

Shortly after our lunch, Michael scheduled a luncheon meeting with five of us laymen from the Cathedral who were like minded. We met in a private dining room at the downtown Capital City Club. I think he mistakenly thought the five of us were spiritually mature and would give him good counsel. When I think of that meeting, the so-called “friends” of Job come to mind. Michael laid out his vision in more detail. He had even done a demographic study that showed Vinings, GA to be 56% unchurched. We all told him we would like to see a new church that was sticking to the gospel. But I was chairman of stewardship at the Cathedral and privy to individual giving. I don’t remember the exact numbers, but something in the neighborhood of 20% of the congregation was giving 80% of the income. The bishop was not stupid; he had the same numbers I did. I predicted that if Michael started a new church, \$500,000 of income would leave St. Philip’s during the first year. Later events would prove that it took the bishop slightly too long to figure the budget situation out. The late Andy Huber

spoke up after my budget statement and told Michael that he was a very good teacher but not a very good preacher.

Michael called me later and said he wanted another meeting in my office and was inviting a couple of other men to join us. We set the date for a couple of days later. He told us at the meeting that we had convinced him of the folly of his ways. Driving home after the first meeting, Michael said he was “really praising and thanking God” because He had put this fine group of mature lay leaders together to set him straight. Starting a new church was a major undertaking, and he was somewhat relieved to know that he had “heard” God wrong. A major seminary had just offered him their presidency, and they told him that starting new churches was for 28-year-old recent seminary graduates, not 39-year-old men with doctorates. Well, God didn’t waste any time speaking to Michael’s spirit. He later told me it was not in an audible voice, but it was as plain as if it had been. There was no mistake in what he was told to do. I seem to remember that Michael got the message about the time he was crossing the Chattahoochee River. I will paraphrase. God said, **“I didn’t tell you to get a group of men and go over the obstacles. I told you to start a church.”** When he told me this, I remembered how it felt when my dad “took me to the woodshed.”

I sure am glad that God led Michael to add just a couple of more men, rather than starting all over with a new group. At any rate, we told him to get the bishop’s permission, and we would support him. I told him I would pray for him and support the new church financially, but I was not ready to promise I would join. I had told him the bishop wouldn’t let him start a church. I had told him I wasn’t sure I would join. As I look back, that was two strikes on me. Later, after my third strike, Michael still didn’t call me out. It was looking more and more like Job and “friends.”

I really didn’t think the bishop would allow this project to go forward. I was putting God in a box. The bishop quickly gave his approval when Michael assured him that the Vinings Mission would be self-supporting from day one and would never be a financial burden on the Atlanta diocese. In the winter of 1986 and spring of 1987, Michael continued the planning process and signed a lease with Lovett School to use their chapel/auditorium on Sundays starting in September. A businessman made the first contribution, and a bank account was opened with \$10,000.

Everything seemed to be in order for the start of the Vinings Mission. Joan and I had made the decision that we would go to the new church. Michael must have been soooooo relieved. We had a lunch date scheduled for Tuesday, April 28. On Monday the 27th, Michael called and asked me if I knew Gil Meredith. I told him that I did, and he wanted to know about him. I told Michael that Gil was a relatively new Christian, but he

was a growing one and thoroughly committed. Michael then read a letter to me that Gil had sent to him. In the letter, Gil said he and his wife Bonnie were “excited” about the new church, but they were wondering why Michael was waiting until September to start. He and Bonnie both had a strong “feeling” that if we waited that long, something was going to keep us from starting at all. Michael asked if I minded if he invited Gil and Andy Huber to join us for lunch the next day. Of course I didn’t mind, and they agreed to meet at our house in Buckhead before going to lunch.

Tuesday was a typical, sunny spring day in Atlanta. We had an atrium next to the pool. Two sides and the roof were glass, and it was a wonderful place for the four of us to meet. Atlanta is a beautiful place in the spring, and I remember how spectacular everything looked that day. Michael explained the rationale for a church starting after Labor Day. The “experts” said new churches needed to be planted in the fall so they could have a “full growing season” before school was out in the spring and families started going to second homes, vacations, etc. Church attendance and giving typically fell off in the summer. He asked Gil what motivated him to write the letter, and I will never forget his answer. He said, “I don’t know, Michael.” I think I was the one who suggested that we start praying about it and see if we couldn’t get an answer. It may have been the shortest prayer session that I have ever been in with four people praying. It was unanimous; we had to start immediately. But where? We had the school lined up for September, but that was four months away. Gil told us it was not a problem. He had felt so strongly that he had reserved a meeting room at the Waverly Hotel for the first few weeks. These two men did not know each other personally until that day, and Gil had reserved that meeting room on his own.

Sunday was only five days away, so we decided to wait 12 days and start on May 10. Not because it was Mother’s Day, but because we didn’t think we could arrange everything we needed for a start-up any sooner. Also, Michael was going to Dallas for a Haggai board meeting the next day and wouldn’t come back til the weekend. We assigned ourselves jobs; one arranged for music, another for setting up the room and Huber for communion. (He ended up forgetting the wine and had to go back home for it.) But I had grown tired of going to church chapter meetings and arguing. It was always a divided group, and I told Michael that I didn’t want to be in leadership. I just wanted to worship there. That should have been strike three for me. But Michael had the patience of Job. I gave him multiple opportunities to rid himself of this thorn. I thank God that he didn’t.

The reason for Gil’s letter soon became clear. Michael was at his board meeting in Dallas on Thursday and his assistant in Atlanta called to tell him the bishop wanted to

see him immediately. He left the board meeting and flew back to Atlanta for a meeting the next day.

When Michael walked in, the bishop told him that this new church thing needed to be put on the “back burner.” It seems that even though the bishop was slow at counting, the new dean wasn’t. When about the tenth man walked into his office to tell him that he was going to move with Youssef, the dean looked at the giving records, did the math and panicked. Michael explained that it was too late to put it on the “back burner.” The bishop said another church was not needed in Atlanta. He went over to a map and told Michael that since it wasn’t yet organized, he wanted the church started in north Georgia around the Young Harris area.

Michael explained that it was organized. The first service was already scheduled for the following week on Mother’s Day, **May 10, 2010**. He reminded the bishop that it was fully approved, and people had already started giving. The bishop hit his forehead with his open palm and said, “Okay, Michael. Don’t advertise it. Keep it quiet.”

I have often wondered how many people would have been there if we hadn’t started in “secret.” We still weren’t sure the bishop couldn’t shut us down. That first service was almost like we were an underground church.

After the last installment, one of my close friends admonished me not to give Michael’s testimony. A full-length movie could be made about how he was able to leave Egypt as a college-age male when even an attempt to do that could have meant a long prison sentence or worse. So, I am not giving his story, you can google “The Church of The Apostles Atlanta” and get the following:

“Even before he was born, it was evident that God had a vision for Michael Amerhom Youssef. His mother was in poor health at the time she became pregnant with Michael, and because her life would be jeopardized by the birth, the doctor recommended terminating the pregnancy. An abortion procedure was scheduled. But God intervened and sent the family pastor to reassure them the night before the procedure was to take place that God was involved in this pregnancy, not to be afraid and that this child would be “born to serve the Lord.” Michael’s parents accepted the pastor’s message as a message from God and obeyed. His mother gave birth and lived to see him surrender his life to the Lord in 1964 at age sixteen.

Believing that God was calling him out of Egypt, Michael sought an exit visa at a time when no university student was permitted to hold a passport or leave the country. God intervened again and miraculously provided approval of his application. He emigrated to Australia where he studied at

Moore Theological College in Sydney, was ordained as a minister and met and married his wife Elizabeth.

The Youssefs came to America in 1977. And in 1978, Michael received a master's degree in theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in California. He later earned a doctorate in social anthropology from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Michael served for nearly ten years with the Haggai Institute, traveling around the world more than 32 times and teaching courses in evangelism and church leadership. He rose to the position of managing director at the age of 31. The family settled in Atlanta, and in 1984, Michael became a United States citizen, fulfilling a dream he held for many years.

He founded The Church of The Apostles in 1987 with fewer than 40 adults and the mission to "equip the saints and seek the lost." The church has since grown to a congregation of more than 3,000. This church on a hill was the launching pad for Leading The Way's international ministry. *Leading The Way with Dr. Michael Youssef* passionately proclaims uncompromising Truth through radio and television programs, the Internet and books, periodicals, and other resources. Programs are translated and broadcast into 20 languages covering more than 200 countries. This Atlanta-based organization partners internationally with in-country follow-up teams to encourage believers in their faith, helping God's kingdom to grow around the world.

The path he has walked has given him a thorough cross-cultural understanding and a firm grasp of Scripture. He preaches, teaches and exhorts with a straightforward and uncompromising delivery based on the authority of the inspired, infallible Word of God. His unique, firsthand understanding of the Holy Land, and of its history and culture, brings the Bible to life for listeners.

Dr. Youssef has authored 22 books to date, the most recent being 'Discover the Power of One.' He has also produced numerous teaching cassette series and booklets on a variety of important subjects to further assist believers in their spiritual growth and maturity on their journey of faith."

Outside of my relationship with God and my family, nothing has given me as much pleasure and blessing as being one of the founding members of The Church of The Apostles and being on the original board of Leading The Way. So many incredible, miraculous things have happened at Apostles that I can only tell a few here. Hopefully a comprehensive history will be written soon.

There were about 500 in attendance on a Sunday during our first year when Michael gave an invitation for those who had never accepted Christ to make the decision and come forward. He explained that people who have been regular church-goers for years, and even some church leaders, may have not truly given their lives to Christ. Fifty-plus people came forward.

We were still a small congregation when God led us to and provided the means to purchase one of the highest-profile properties in Buckhead for His building. It was decided early on that we would not take on debt and that we would give a double tithe of 20% of church income to missions. Most of us small thinkers would have been overwhelmed if we had known it would require \$75,000,000 to put everything in place on that land.

Michael did 30-second sermons for radio to advertise Apostles, and they were so effective that several of us thought he should do full 30-minute programs. He agreed, and we bought time on a few radio stations. But it didn't seem to be doing much. Michael had invited four of us to be on the board of the radio ministry, and I will never forget the meeting when he suggested that it might not be the best use of resources to stay on the air. Hank McCamish was chairman, and he thought we should "keep it going for a while." Someone expressed the opinion that the main reason for starting the church might be as the foundation for a radio/TV ministry. Michael said that he "had a face for radio, not TV". We laughed, never dreaming that very soon Leading The Way would be heard and/or seen in more than 100 countries in 20 languages.

Lay Bible studies were flourishing, and I invited nine men to join me for lunch on Thursdays for 10 weeks at the downtown Capital City Club to study the gospel of John. These were all men of influence who were regular church attendees, but I guessed (correctly) that most of them were not regular Bible readers. Everyone accepted. But I didn't tell them until the first meeting that I was teaching the first lesson and each one of them would lead one week. I will always remember the groans. I told Michael the plan was to get them interested and have everyone invite a friend. Then we would divide into two groups after the first 10 weeks. Around the eighth week, one of the men suggested that we should do exactly that—with no prompting from me. We had a Christmas party with wives that first year, and by then we were reading the NIV Bible in chronological order on a daily basis. Several of the men gave testimony to what the study meant to them. The businessman who had made the first gift to start Apostles said that his grandmother read the Bible to him when he was a little boy, but he never thought he would read it from cover to cover in one year. After more than 20 years, those lunches are still going on; one at the country club in Brookhaven and the other downtown. Three of the originals are still regulars more than 20 years later. I visit when we are in Atlanta.

I had the privilege of serving as business manager of Apostles for one year, when we were a few years old. I retired when we turned the job over to a professional. I was volunteer labor, but Michael insisted on paying me what I was worth. He presented me with \$1.00 during the Sunday service the week after my retirement. I think I had to borrow a dime to put my tithe in the collection plate.

There is lots of excitement in a start-up church that God obviously is blessing. I want to share two stories to demonstrate that, and then I will quit boring you. Ron Blue is a Christian financial planner and author. He was in a meeting with Chuck Swindoll. I think he was on Chuck's ministry board. Ron was so enthusiastic about this new church that Chuck asked him to describe it. I will paraphrase the conversation as Ron recounted it to us. He thought for a minute and said it was a liturgical church with a Baptist minister and about half the congregation seemed to be charismatic. Ron said that Chuck replied that no two of those three things would work together.

About that same time, Joan and I were doing a lay renewal at First Presbyterian Church in Griffin, Georgia. The late Harry Dent was the featured preacher. Harry was a lawyer from Columbia, South Carolina. He had been counsel to President Richard Nixon before Watergate and was replaced by John Dean. According to Harry, he barely missed being indicted in the Watergate scandal. He was a Baptist layman and was known as a Christian. In an article published shortly after Harry's death in December 2007, the New York Times credited him with having more to do with changing the South from Democratic to Republican than any other individual. Harry told us in a team meeting that he had attended church his whole life, and even been a deacon, but didn't know he wasn't saved until Chuck Colson and Jeb Magruder led him to Christ after they were both indicted. Harry quit practicing law, went back to Columbia Bible College and then went on "the sawdust trail." He was enthusiastic about our new church because we were so excited. He said something that I will never forget. He had turned down the call to be the pastor of a very big, important church, and he said, "God has not called me to pastor a church. But if he ever does, I hope He will let me start a new church." He went on to explain that he had been in mainline churches with lots of renewal happening, but there always seemed to be people in the power structure with their heels dug in, resisting change. Harry said, "I don't think you can put new wine in old wineskins." In my opinion, most (not all) of the mainline churches are "old wineskins."

We realized from the beginning that we might not be able to remain in the "old wine skins" of the Episcopal Church. We formed a separate foundation to own property. And when we became an independent Anglican congregation, we had no legal problems over property ownership.

I thought I was finished writing when it occurred to me that I had mentioned in a previous installment that I was going to tell about the “ups and downs” of my walk with the Lord. I only have written about the ups. There is a major down. The main problem with my “walk with the Lord” is my “walk with the Lord”. You only need to read Genesis to find that God created us in His image to fellowship with Him. I have not heard anyone ever say they were spending too much time with God. I *have* heard lots of people say they were not spending enough time with Him. My time alone with God in prayer and reading His Word is, and always has been, the weakest part of my walk.

Most years, I read the NIV Bible in chronological order that takes me through the whole Bible in 12 months. Some years, I get way behind and wind up in a very dry place. In the early 80s, Joan and I were attending a huge Christian rally in the New Orleans Superdome. I was sitting in the lobby of the Windsor Court Hotel (“suffering” for Jesus) talking with Dr. Paul Walker. I was lamenting that my personal time with God was weak, and I had spent no time with Him that day. Paul came to my defense and said he hadn’t either. He explained that, with our lifestyles, it was hard to have a certain time every day. I was flying around the world in different time zones, etc. But still, I was surprised this big-time preacher had not had his quiet time that morning. So I asked him when he prayed last. His answer made my point. He replied, “Yesterday.” I asked him how long he had prayed yesterday, and he said, “Eight hours.” He was praying about something that caused him to lock the door of his office and pray all day. I had prayed the day before too—probably for about five minutes.

Two years ago, Joan and Elizabeth were out of town, and Michael and I were having dinner together. He asked me what I thought God wanted me to do with the rest of my life. And I babbled things like witnessing, maybe helping start a church on the Gulf Coast, blah, blah, blah. Michael listened and then told me that when I had called him earlier in the day, he was in prayer about telling me that I had drifted away from a close personal relationship with God. He said God had been speaking to his spirit about telling me. Michael didn’t want to offend his friend, and he was asking God for Him to take the message to me. But at that very moment, my name popped up on his caller ID. It was not audible; but very clearly, Michael was being directed to give me the message. It was apparent that he was uncomfortable as we talked because he didn’t want to hurt my feelings.

I knew that I was in a dry place. The previous couple of years had not been easy. Katrina had flooded our house. I had made the worst business decision of my life and lost a lot of money. Some personal relationships were suffering, and I was neglecting my most important relationship of all. I put Michael at ease with Proverbs 9:8, “Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you.” I couldn’t

quote the verse then, I just said; “Michael, only a fool doesn’t accept a rebuke from a wise man.”

Time with God is our power source. I heard someone give a good analogy once. “To not spend quality time with God is like inheriting \$1,000,000 from your father, and saying, ‘Thank you, dad. But I only need half the money. You keep the rest.’”

That’s it folks. I had no idea I was going to write 10,000 words in this last installment, but all the great things that have happened at Apostles couldn’t be recounted in 10 times that many. God honored a humble airline pilot by letting me experience His power firsthand. I think we are in the most perilous times in our history, so “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. ... But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15).