

Convention Sermon

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"Too Much To Lose"

by Charles G. Fuller

Recently a Major General crashed his private plane into an embankment, near a freeway in our city.

And what caused this near-fatal plane crash? It wasn't due to inexperience at the controls, for the General had hundreds of hours of flying time to his credit. The weather conditions were good. There was clear radio contact with the tower. But the plane experienced a sudden and mysterious loss of power while in flight.

For whatever the reason, a mid-course loss of power is any pilot's nightmare. For even though the situation can often be corrected, no pilot wants to consider the alternative.

It is no less a nightmare for any contingent of God's people to experience a mid-course loss of spiritual power. The threat of such a situation is so fraught with danger that any sensitive, sensible Christian would seek to avoid and eliminate the potentials leading to it.

Simply stated, my fellow Southern Baptists, we Christians know any loss of touch with God's power is just too much for us to lose!

There is a sequence of events, recorded between the sixth and ninth chapters of Mark's Gospel, which are well worth the study of any Christian, any church, or any denomination, wanting the assurance of suffering no loss of God-given power.

In the first few verses of Mark's sixth chapter we read of a congregation whose attitude actually made it impossible for Jesus to do what He, otherwise, could have done.

You might say it was a case of:

(1)

Power Lost Because of Preconception

"And he went out from thence, and came into his own country; and his disciples follow him. And when the sabbath day was come, he began to teach in the synagogue: and many hearing him were astonished, saying, From whence hath this man these things? and what wisdom is this which is given unto him, that even such mighty works are wrought by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon? and are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at him. But Jesus said unto them, A prophet is not without honor, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house. And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them. And he marvelled because of their unbelief. . . ." (Mark 6:1-6a)

The synagogue members in Nazareth had their minds made up about Jesus, and their preconceived notions robbed them of the ministry He could have had among them. They resisted Him, for they felt they knew all there was to know about Him. Hence, the potential of Christ in their midst was forfeited because they could not accept Him for who He really was.

We Southern Baptist would do well to learn a lesson at this point. We

may insist that we would never knowingly resist the presence of Christ in our fellowship, but what if we reject one in whom Christ dwells? Do we not risk, then, the possibility of squandering the Lord's liberty and power?

For a number of years, upon seeing a pastor-friend of mine, who has spent his entire ministry in the deep south, he would ask, with no apparent interest in my answer, "How are you and all the liberals getting along up in Virginia?"

Admittedly, I resented that inference. I felt it was an unfair generalization of my adopted Virginia Baptist family. What's more, my theological conservatism is a foregone conclusion in the state where I have served for 27½ years, and I prize that reputation.

Thankfully we Southern Baptists are not as prone as we once were to use "geographic theology" as an index by which to categorize each other. Nevertheless, the memories of such "trials by preconception" still linger.

Several of us who attended college together felt led of the Lord to travel 1500 miles to enroll in Southwestern Seminary. To do so meant we had to cross that vast theological "sea" known as The Mississippi River! It also meant we met with obvious suspicion on either "shore."

A few weeks before graduation, a minister whom I had admired, asked what seminary I planned to attend. When I told him, he replied, "You are a 'dwarfed mule!'" (You understand, that is a translation of what he said, not the original.) Being from Virginia did not exactly open broad doors of abundant opportunity for us in the Southwest, but we will always be grateful for the likes of the late Huber Drumwright, Dr. Robert Naylor, Dr. W. A. Criswell, Bo and Dick Baker, Neal Jones, and some on the Southwestern Seminary faculty, who accepted us, while others apparently wondered about our theological reliability.

Am I suggesting there is no place for theological distinctiveness? Of course not! If you were to ask me to identify myself I would readily tell you that I am a "non-union" conservative, who pays dues to no one! I would tell you that I believe the Bible is the authoritative, authentic voice of God put to print, without mixture of error, but I would ask, please let me be what I know I am, and don't try to stampe me, goad me, or isolate me to be what someone else insists I am!

Quite often there are those who want you to have the courage of *their* convictions, insisting you have no courage otherwise. I have found the most courageous thing for you to do is also the most difficult: simply be your own person!

What I am saying is that no Christian should reject another Christian, especially when we have never taken the time to really know each other! To do so could short-circuit the liberty and power of Christ in our midst, and that is too much for us to lose!

As we read further in Mark's sixth chapter we come to the account of the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 in Galilee. (Mark 6:30-52)

The disciples had been so heavily involved in ministries of preaching and deliverance they had little time for nourishment or rest. Doubtless, news of the tragic death of John the Baptist had further added to their weariness. So when they met with the Lord to report on their work, He suggested they all go somewhere for a time of refreshment and renewal. No sooner had they launched the boat enroute to their retreat site than the crowds, anticipating where they were going, ran ahead to meet them.

So instead of a time of retreat, the Lord and the disciples were suddenly confronted with the demands of another time-consuming ministry. Mark tells us Jesus was moved with compassion toward the crowd, but you can be assured the *disciples* didn't feel that way about it! Once again, they felt the crowds had trespassed on their privacy with Jesus, so they seized upon the next meal time as an opportunity to be rid of those who clamored about the Lord.

When the disciples suggested to Jesus that He send the crowd away because it was time to eat, He told them rather to seat the people. He then proceeded to feed them with the miraculous multiplication of a boy's modest lunch.

After that miraculous feeding, Jesus dismissed the crowd and told the disciples to continue their boat trip, saying He would join them later. Shortly thereafter, the disciples and their boat were being tossed about in an abrupt storm. They huddled in fear, helpless and distraught, until

Jesus came walking upon the water to quiet the storm.

This group of men, who evidently felt very special about themselves and about their particular intimacy with Jesus, now found themselves utterly *powerless*. And what brought them to this state of affairs? Was it due only to the effects of an unexpected storm?

I think not. Jesus knew the storm was coming, even if the disciples did not.

This was probably a matter of:

(II)

Power Lost Because of Pride

It is certainly conceivable that the Lord intentionally placed His disciples in the midst of that storm with the expressed purpose to correct their spirit. There can be little doubt their spirit was in *need* of discipline.

"And He went up unto them into the ship; and the wind ceased: and they were sore amazed in themselves beyond measure, and wondered. For they considered not the miracle of the loaves; for their heart was hardened." (Mark 6:51-52)

Think of it! The disciples had witnessed the miraculous feeding of more than 5,000 but it failed to make an impact upon them! And why? Could it be they were so impressed with their exclusive relationship with Jesus, and so irritated with the attempt of the crowd to lay claim to Him, that they became oblivious even to a miracle?

For whatever the reason, it is a sad state of affairs for any Christian, or group of Christians, to be so impressed with their own nearness to the Lord that they cannot see Him at work in the lives of others! That kind of exclusivism virtually guarantees the forfeiture of any spiritual power we Christians might hope to have.

A few years ago, in a session of our Southern Baptist Convention, a man preached, and delivered his soul in doing it. His message was strongly Biblical and truly Christ-exalting. As he preached, the Holy Spirit within me bore witness to the Spirit in him. Yet I was astounded at the sparseness of applause and the obvious absence of those salvos of "amens" which so often typify the response to the Gospel when Southern Baptists hear it preached. What was the problem? Could it be that we were unconsciously calculating our response not to the gospel, but to the *person* doing the preaching? Must the preacher have certain group identifications before we can appreciate the Gospel when we hear it?

Whether it be conscious or unconscious, there is no boycott quite so vicious as a boycott between Christians at the very point where they most agree!

The Gospel of Jesus is the Gospel, whoever is preaching it! And, incidentally, immorality is immorality, whoever is committing it!

Maybe we Southern Baptists are like unto the disciples caught in a storm, whose need is to have our spirit disciplined. I am convinced we cannot make much progress working through our positions, polity, policies and polarizations until we work through our spirit!

Are we committed to Christ? Or are we committed to Conservatism or to Moderateness?

Don't misunderstand me. I am not endorsing peace at any price. Nor do I believe neutrality is our answer. I'm not neutral about the Bible, evangelism or missions! If, indeed, the Bible is our creed, our rule of faith and practice, then it must remain to us authentic, authoritative and adequate, and it must never be held up for ridicule!

There is a need among us, however, for a *purity* and *fairness* of spirit. If conservatism is represented by someone with the disposition of a "junkyard dog" and moderateness is the position of someone who is "profane as a pirate", where lies the hope for a purity of spirit?

If the "fairness" we seek is that of the handpicked referee who makes certain all the close calls go to the home team, where lies the hope for a fairness of spirit?

Mark it well, fellow Baptist, to risk the loss of God's power upon us because we refuse to exchange arrogance and pride for a purity of spirit is just too much to lose!

In the 9th chapter of Mark's Gospel we discover still another account of a loss in spiritual power. In this instance it was a matter of:

(III)

Power Lost Because of Presumption

"And when he came to his disciples, he saw a great multitude about them, and the scribes questioning with them. And straitway all the people, when they beheld him, were greatly amazed, and running to him saluted him. And he asked the scribes, What question ye with them? And one of the multitude answered and said, Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit; And wheresoever he taketh him, he tearth him; and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away: and I

spake to thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not." (Mark 9:14-18)

The Lord stepped into the gap left by the ineptness of His disciples and He rebuked the evil spirit within the young man. The demon having come out, Jesus helped the young fellow stand up and sent him on his way.

The disciples were bewildered as to why they could not cast out the demon. After all, not long before this they had been greatly used in casting out devils and healing the sick. Evidently they presumed if they had been mightily used of God previously, they would always be so empowered.

"And when He was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out? And He said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting." (Mark 9:28-29)

Some things are accomplished only by spiritual means. They are done God's way and under the conditions God establishes. With regard to our usefulness to the Lord, the emphasis is not to be placed upon skill, or strategy, or past success, but upon our present spiritual condition . . . the current wholesomeness of our relationship to God!

No one can deny that a great deal of strategy has been designed and deployed in Southern Baptist ranks in recent days. But regardless whose strategy it is, . . . moderate strategy, . . . conservative strategy, . . . well-intended strategy, . . . devious strategy, if it is conceived by minds which are bitter, arrogant, smug, frightened or presumptuous, God will not bless it, even if we ask Him! In fact, we ought to be embarrassed if we *do* ask Him!

The President of our denominational family said it well several weeks ago:

"When diverse issues rise to the surface, men of real character will be able to respond in the spirit of love and honest discussion. But when there is bitterness and anger and resentment, ill will and jealousy, that says something about the character of the men involved. When that happens, they lose their usefulness before God. God can use a man who may be in error, but whose spirit is right, but a man who is right in his theology but wrong in his spirit is a hindrance to God."

I believe I speak for an enormous host of Southern Baptists:

- . . . who believe there is more to being a Baptist than being a warm body and knowing Baptist is spelled with a "p,"
- . . . who believe there is a limit to the latitude for theological plurality,
- . . . but who do not believe in order to have an authentically Biblical, evangelistic, missionary denomination we must destroy our fellowship!

We are under no obligation to fulfill the prognostications of those who analyze and write about us. We are not compelled to go the way of some other denominational bodies. Because another group has been swallowed by a whale of compromise or obliterated by the dynamite of division is no mandate for us, nor is it a fate to which we must ever surrender!

After 140 years of preaching the Gospel, building churches, sending missionaries, studying the Word, praying together, weathering wars, crises and change, surely we know better than to say, "With God some things are impossible!"

No, it remains some things still "come out" by prayer and fasting!

A few weeks ago we buried a missionary giant among Southern Baptists, Dr. Baker James Cauthen. In 1979 Dr. Cauthen spoke to us for the last time as President of our Foreign Mission Board, and, although he spoke in the context of the enormous missionary challenge before us then, one of his statements needs to be heard again, but in the context of our present need:

"Organization will not achieve what we are talking about. Promotion will not do it." Southern Baptists "must go to the depths of prayer, both individually, and as a denomination, beyond anything we've ever experienced."

If forty-five of today's best-known singers of popular songs can set aside egos and the endless yards of necessary red tape, and stay up all night to make a record to raise money to feed Africa's hungry, there is no reason why Southern Baptists cannot listen to the recommendations of men like Dr. Franklin Pascall, calling for a *truly* representative, carefully chosen committee from our midst, to pray and fast their way to solutions for our togetherness!

Some insist there's little or no middle ground left among us. I do not believe that. And a great host of other Southern Baptists don't believe it either! When I read a statement like the one recently issued by six of our finest pastors in North Carolina, Godly men, asserting their belief in the full and absolute inspiration of the Bible, I take heart. In a preface to a

sequence of unifying suggestions, men like Mark Cortis, Richard Liner and Don Bouldin say to us:

"Baptists need to back up and take a sober look at our Convention before we destroy the magnificent tool God has given us for reaching our world together for Christ."

This not so much a time for strategy as it is a time for prayer and fasting!

For you see, whatever the cause, whatever the scheme, however impassioned or however shrewd, if we are unfit to stand on holy ground, you can write, "Ichabod" over all we are, for the "glory" is gone!

In the hours we've needed them, God has raised up statesmen among Southern Baptists . . . yes, and stateswomen. He will do it again. We must pray to that end. There is too much to lose if we don't.

The Lord has so much for us yet to do.

Bold Mission Thrust is far from complete.

Demographics tell us there will be seven billion people in the world shortly after the turn of the century, and we have not yet witnessed to most of the four and a half billion who live on this earth now.

Planned Growth in Giving has barely been born.

Next year we want to concert our efforts in simultaneous evangelistic crusades, saying again to our country, "Good News, America, God loves you!"

There are 14.3 million of us who are called Southern Baptists. If anybody can make a difference in the evangelization of our nation and the world we can! But not without the power of God upon us.

To lose touch with that power is to lose that opportunity and that is just too much to lose!

There is still another passage in Mark's ninth chapter well worth our study. It does not describe a situation wherein there is an obvious loss of spiritual power, but it reveals an attitude which thwarts and impedes the work of Christ. It is an attitude which can lead to:

(IV)

Power Lost Because of Preoccupation

"And He came to Capernaum: and being in the house he asked them, What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way? But they held their peace: for by the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest. And He sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all. And He took a child, and set him in the midst of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them, Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me; and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me. And John answered him, saying, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us; and we forbade him, because he followeth not us. But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part."

(Mark 9:33-40)

While Jesus talked of humility, ministry and servanthood, it appears His disciple, John, was preoccupied with the rejection of someone else's ministry. It may be he was so preoccupied with his disdain for someone else, he missed hearing what Jesus had to say altogether.

That is tragic, to be so concerned with rejecting someone because he is not in your fellowship that you turn a deaf ear to Jesus! Needless to say, that would be an almost impossible frame of mind for God to endue with His power!

One of the most embarrassing moments in my early ministry came when I was invited to be a guest during the ordination examination of a young man who had just enrolled in one of our Southern Baptist seminaries. He had graduated from a non-denominational Bible college and that one fact seemed to be the dominant concern of every member of the examining committee. The young man was quizzed for nearly two hours, mostly about his choice of college and the effects of that choice upon his ministry. To be sure, he *should* have been questioned about his loyalty to our denomination. If one is going to *serve* Southern Baptists he or she should *be* a Southern Baptist, through and through!

However, the line of questioning was so punctuated by the suspicion the group felt toward the young man, he was asked very little about his doctrinal views, his interpretation of the ministry or his approach to pastoral leadership. When, at the end of the examination, the candidate was asked if he had any comments, he courteously responded, "I appreciate your questions, gentlemen, but I had hoped I would be able to tell you more about my calling, my beliefs and even my conversion."

The room was filled with momentary silence, for all present suddenly realized that the affirmation of a Christian brother had been overshadowed by a suspicion of him.

owed by a suspicion of him.

Thankfully, the young man *was* approved for ordination, for he graduated from one of our seminaries and has now for over twenty-five years served as one of our most faithful foreign missionaries!

One of the chilling indictments in the Old Testament is the one leveled at the ten brothers of Joseph before selling him to a caravan of merchants for twenty pieces of silver. Of them the Scriptures say, "They could not speak peaceably to him!"

And if you fail to see the way in which that Old Testament circumstance could well apply to those of us who are brothers in this denominational family, your problem is not with your position on Biblical inspiration, your problem is with a heart which is frozen over!

Several years ago I was a passenger on a commercial flight during one of those memorable bad weather days. About the time the flight attendants were half finished serving beverages to the passengers, the plane was caught in some heavy turbulence. Suddenly, the plane struck an air pocket, and, as the plane dropped, there was a frightening noise. For a split second, most of us on board thought we had collided with something mid-air.

Momentarily, the flight attendants hurried their beverage cart back to its place. Then one of the attendants spoke over the public address system, announcing the discontinuation of their beverage service. What she said I have committed to memory because it is replete with impact. Her message was, "Ladies and gentlemen, the air is too turbulent, and there is not enough time for us to continue to serve as we have!"

The presence of turbulence and the pressure of time could interrupt, even eliminate, cabin service, but, thankfully, they could not stop service up in the flight cabin! The captain and his crew were well in touch with the power that sustained the plane through turbulence and kept it on schedule.

My Southern Baptist family, it is not for us to despair or panic in the midst of turbulence, but to keep in touch with the power of God! We must. If we don't, there is just too much to lose!