

It is told that once a small girl heard a sermon by C. H. Spurgeon, and whispered to her mother at the end of it, "Mother, how does he know what goes on in our house?" Have you ever felt that?

It is the power of Christ Jesus to see into the depths of the human heart. Not only does He see the evil of it, but also the person that you can become. He is like the surgeon who sees the diseased part, but who also sees the health which will follow when the diseased part is removed.

This Samaritan woman was in dialogue with the Son of God. While the Scripture does not tell all of what happened in her heart, I believe her transformation occurred as Jesus spoke to her in verse 26. After a fascinating time of repartee, Christ gets to the heart of the matter. He relates to the struggling, hurting, sinful human being that He is the one who can bring meaning and order to her life. I believe that it is at this point that He beautifully revealed Himself to her and she accepted Him as King of her life. He sees us as we truly are, but fortunately He is able to see past the hurt, the sin, and the failure and to see the person that we can become.

One thing that I have heard across this Convention over the last few years is that some people are seeing hope for the first time in years. I beg of you not to lose hope. While I have tried my best to bring unity, to point our Convention back to the basics of soul-winning and missions, to call us to a begging of God for spiritual awakening and revival, the ultimate answer is to know that Christ is our only hope. Just as He was the only hope for this Samaritan woman, He is the only hope for our Convention. Will we follow a Jesus agenda or not? Will we treat others as Jesus treated others? Will we relate to our contemporary culture the way Jesus related to his? Will we bravely, boldly, and sensitively share the good news that Jesus saves, and only Jesus saves?

THE FIRST INSTINCT OF THE SAMARITAN WOMAN WAS TO SHARE HER DISCOVERY. Having discovered this amazing Man, she was compelled to share her discovery with the others. She was so excited that she even left her water pot. She had found "living water." See that exciting story in vv. 28-30. Now look with me down to see the results of this sharing in vv. 29-42. Isn't that exciting? **This woman who had been the talk of the town now encouraged the town to talk...about Jesus.** This woman who had been the source of moral failure for some now became the source of spiritual good news for many. This woman who had been a tribute to wrong living now pointed people to right living.

First to find and then to tell are the two great steps of the Christian life. I believe that our Convention needs to fall in love with the Lord all over again. I believe that if we do, then there will be renewed passion to tell others about Him. Will you be a part of this great movement of falling in love with the Lord Jesus all over again? Yes, it would bring about a Great Commission Resurgence because we will fall in love with the One who spoke the Great Commission. Yes, baptisms will increase, because we will fall in love with the One who told us to baptize all nations. Yes, we will see the gospel of Christ taken to every man, woman, boy, and girl on the face of this earth, because we will fall in love with the One who gave us that mission.

The woman at the well found her life changed forever by a conversation with Christ. I believe that our world is looking for men and women whose lives have been radically transformed by a conversation with Christ. Let us live out the relationship that we claim to have with our Lord Jesus. Please remember the signs that were recognized by the elders of the village of Simeulue. Let us recognize the signs that are before us and fall in love with Jesus again and follow His commands and His way so that we might see a brighter day and save our island.

Al Gilbert's Convention Message

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A Death Check: Taking a Serious Look at Our Stewardship 1 Corinthians 4

Thank you, Mr. President. If you have your Bible, please turn to First Corinthians, chapter four.

Introduction

On Feb. 24th, 2005, I received the call from the doctor's office that the CT scan showed something unusual, and that they had scheduled an appointment with the surgeon. My wife and I arrived at the surgeon's office early that next Thursday morning. The nurse said, "The doctor will be with you in a moment," but it seemed like hours before we heard the gentle knock at the door and he stepped into the room. Without much introduction, he launched into his explanation. "Sorry it took so long; my partner and I have been studying your CT scan and we are convinced that you have a cancerous tumor, what is known as a 'liposarcoma'; it is in your mesentery."

What he said next is hard to remember...it went something like this: "It is a little unusual to see it there. The bad news is that it is in the worst possible place. It is wrapped around the aorta and the vessels that feed the intestine; the surgery will be messy, and no matter what, we will never be able to get it all. It is hard from the film to tell how what stage it is in. The good news would be that it may be of a grade that we can remove some of it and it would not be life-threatening; in this case it will simply grow back and we'll have to do surgery every few years. The worst case, however, is that it could be a grade where there is nothing that we can really do; in this case, you have less than five years to live. I know that's a lot to throw at you at one time, so why don't you take a few days to think about it? We don't have to do anything for the next week or two."

The days that followed were very interesting to say the least. Who should we tell? We wanted people to pray for us, but there's a lot of difference between surgery every few years and having less than five years to live.

For the first time in my life, I felt like I was staring death in the face; I had to stop and really think about how I had lived my life. I entered into a season of what I came to call a "death check." Am I really dead to myself and alive to Christ? Can I really say, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain?" What difference has my life made? Has it really mattered? What will be said about my life when I'm dead and gone? Perhaps it sounds a little self-centered. These questions kept ping-ponging through my head: "What will my wife and kids say about me when I'm gone? What will be the summary statement of my life and ministry? You know, I never got around to writing those books...."

In the weeks that followed, we were referred to a special cancer clinic in New York. As we prepared, the doctors ordered another test—this time an MRI to get a more detailed look. As we walked into the oncologist's office we were quite surprised when she said, "The MRI shows that it's not a liposarcoma; it's the wrong kind of tissue. What you have is not life-threatening, just life-altering. We'll never be able to remove it, but it will not end your life."

We were grateful for the good report, but the "death check" lived on. I had to start living like I had limited time left on earth. I felt like I had stared death in the face, and it was time to start living like the clock was running out. Although I now know that I may have longer than five years to live, I have to live...I want to live, with a sense of urgency about how I am spending my life.

Some denominational doctors have said that we are sick, and it may be fatal. I think most of us would agree that it's way too early to say that we are dying, but our "medical tests"—our statistics—are not good. We can't afford to continue business as usual. We must look death in the face and decide how we—this Convention—ought to live. In a recent interview, Dr. Danny Akin said: "The (SBC) may be top-heavy, bloated and unfocused but it is "premature" to write its obituary."

In those weeks of my "death check" I was reminded of one of my life-verses: 1 Cor. 4.

Paul essentially says: "This is how I want to be known ... how I want to be remembered...." We all know Paul had looked death in the face many times, and these are important words for leaders to consider when evaluating priorities and deciding how to live life.

I'd like to invite you to look at this text with me and **conduct a personal Death Check**. Are you willing to ask the hard questions? How are you living your life? How you approaching your ministry? What will be said about you when you it's over? And it will be over sooner than you think. If you are not willing to submit your life to it individually, we cannot really submit to God together collectively as a Convention.

And I'd also like to challenge us to have courage to submit to this text together—as a Convention.

In light of all that is being said about us, are we willing to do a "death check?" Do we have the courage to ask the tough questions about how we approach the ministries of this Convention? What do we want said about us as a Convention ... when our time is up? Are we willing to let these recent tests results change the way we live?

We may not be a dying Convention, but we face many challenges. We have **faced the challenge of doctrinal purity and now we face the challenge of denominational priorities**. Soon we will be passing the baton to the next generation. I don't know about you, but I have the chance to talk with quite a few, and they tell me that they are not sure they want it when it comes time for us to give it to them!

Look at 1 Cor. 4:1 closely, here's what Paul says:

(1) This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

(2) Moreover, it is required of stewards that they are found trustworthy.

Here, Paul uses two simple phrases to describe his life and ministry. What a summary; what focus. These two phrases give crisp definition about his approach. Look at it:

First, his ATTITUDE: "Servants of Messiah (Christ)" and then

His sense of ACCOUNTABILITY: "Stewards of the Mysteries of God."

A Servant of Messiah? Interesting choice of words for his resume, don't you think?

There are multiple Greek words he could have used to say "servant." He could have chosen "doulos" to describe himself as a "bondservant" like he opened his letter to the Romans or the Philippians. He could have repeated the word he had just used in chapter 3 (verse 5); the term "diakonos" ... where get our word "deacon." It means servant.

But, instead, he chose another term for her to put on his resume, to describe his life and ministry. He called himself a servant ... literally an "under-rower."

Paul, the greatest of all apostles, the missionary of the book of Acts, the theologian of the letter to the Romans, describes himself as a servant ... an under-rower. A man under authority ... way down under.

This term paints a vivid picture. You can imagine the old ship with the banks of oars moving rhythmically back and forth, gracefully through the open seas. The slaves, the under-rowers, chained to their seats, with their hands on the oars, are constantly laboring for the good of the ship, listening to the beat of the drummer, as the pace is set for their task. Sometimes slow ... thump, thump. Push-pull. Sometimes the pace is increased as the captain gives the order for

"double time." The muscles begin to shake as the drumbeat intensely demands the labor thump, thump, thump, thump

God has called us to stay chained to the oars and listen to drumbeat of Holy Spirit. The Captain sets the direction. The Captain sets the pace. The servant, the under-rower, doesn't really know if land is in sight or not. He faithfully keeps his hands on the oars; that's his job, he's the under-rower.

That's a good picture of us. That's not your church pastor—it's His. He's the Captain of the ship—that's not your job! He sets the direction; He sets the pace. What is your job? You are the under-rower. Your assignment is to keep your hands on the oar and listen to the beat of the drum. The Holy Spirit beats the time ... thump, thump ... you keep your hands on the oar. Jesus, the Captain of the ship, sets the direction. He has promised that He will build His church.

You are not the slave driver; you are not the slave master; you are not the drummer. You are the slave. How do you want to be known? Paul said, I want to be known as a servant of Christ; a servant of Messiah; an "under-rower."

It's a high calling. We are called to be servants of the Messiah, the Christ.

Paul then adds another word to his resume—look at verse one again. This first phrase he uses speaks of his attitude, his approach—servant.

The next phrase speaks to Paul's accountability. He wanted to be known as a steward—a manager.

We don't use the word "steward" in our everyday conversation. But, when we understand what it means, and how God has given us this assignment, it should weigh on us every day! This word, built on "oikos," refers to someone who manages the affairs of his master's household.

The manager, the steward, is not the owner of the house. Instead, he has been entrusted with overseeing something that belongs to someone else.

Like every steward, we will one day give an account for the way we have managed what has been entrusted to us. Look at it again in 1 Cor. 4.

"It is expected (it is required) of stewards, that each one be found faithful." (1 Cor. 4:2)

Then he says: *"It is a small thing..."* (v. 3). Compared to a big thing, that we will all give an accounting to God, it is a small thing! And, he goes on:

The One who evaluates me is the Lord. And one day, every motive will be brought to light and praise will come to each one ... from the Lord (vv. 4-5).

And he continues to drive home his sense of stewardship. Notice verse 7—everything we have, we received. We did not achieve it, but we received it. And, it is not our own. We don't own it—we are stewards.

We have all probably heard verse 2 preached with reference to money. Although we can make application of a stewardship of money, we need to first understand the primary meaning of the text. The statement made is that we have been given a "Stewardship of Mysteries."

To understand this stewardship, it seems right to ask two questions:

1. What are the mysteries? and

2. How do we exercise this stewardship?

1. What are these mysteries?

In this same letter, Paul uses this term to speak of the mystery of Messiah, the mystery of the cross; the mystery of the resurrection—

"Behold, I show you a mystery, we shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed..."

In other letters, he refers to the mystery of lawlessness, the mystery of godliness, the mystery of the church as the bride of Christ.

Let's just focus on a couple of things that describe these mysteries:

(1) The message of the cross is now revealed; it has been entrusted to the church as a stewardship.

In chapter two, of this Corinthian letter, Paul wrote: *"If they had understood (this mystery) they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory"* (2:8).

In 2 Corinthians we read that this Word of Reconciliation has been given to us. I once heard Al Mohler say, "the church is the repository of the gospel." That's it! God has deposited this message of Christ in His church. And He tells us we are accountable to Him for proclaiming the message of Messiah. It is a sacred trust. We stand before the world and plead ... "be ye reconciled to God!" (2 Cor. 5:20)

We see that the Message has been given to us and ...

(2) The mission has been entrusted to us.

Repeatedly, when Paul speaks of his stewardship, he uses these terms together. He speaks of God's intended global impact of this message of Messiah. Repeatedly, when he speaks of his stewardship, he uses the same terms and explains it in the light of the mission.

To better understand the challenge of this stewardship, look with me at how these words are used together in the book of Ephesians. Look at chapter 3.

"You have heard of the stewardship of God's grace given to me for you ... My insight into the Mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known, but now has been made known..." (Eph. 3:4-5)

"To be specific that the ETHNOS ... the Gentiles, the nations."

Look at it there in verse 6. "Ethnos" You don't have to be a Greek scholar to hear the meaning of the word: Ethnos-ethnic. red & yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight.

Paul's understanding of his calling and our mission, is that the weight of our stewardship sits heavy. We are called to get this message of Messiah to the nations!

Paul uses the same terms in Colossians. Look at it in Col. 1:25-27. He says I have been given a stewardship. A stewardship of what? Of this mystery that is for the Gentiles, for the Ethnos, for all the world!

Make sure you get this. This message, this stewardship carries with it a global mandate.

For too long, pastor, you have acted as though the "Ethnos" was the job of the Mission Board. It's your job...it's your stewardship. You must understand it! You must teach it!

God has a plan to be worshiped by all the peoples of the world. He is bringing worshipers to Himself from every tribe and tongue and nation and people.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

We live in a world of instant news; instant and global reporting. Friedman's title got it right, *"The World is Flat"* Every day we see the news as it happens: The cyclone in South Asia, the earthquake in China, the report on our troops from the frontline of war.

If it's not good for the whole world ... is it really good enough? Does God really have a plan for the whole world? Is that our mission?

Look at this map. Nothing special about it really. I just want you to look at it and get a fresh picture about just how big this world really is. There are over 6 billion people on the planet. As you look at this map, take notice where we live, over here on the left—the western hemisphere. At the top, you see the U.S. and Canada. Over 300 million people live up here with us in North America.

Then, start at Mexico and go south. From the Mexico border to the tip of South America, there are over 500 million people. Put that together ... now don't get lost in the numbers ... just look at the picture! Keep it simple. On the left side of the map, there are 800 million people. But, the one country of India has more than 900 million people. More people live in India than live on the left side of the map. And China? Over 1 billion people—1.5 times as many people live in that one country—China—1.5 times as many people live in China as live on the left side of the map!

Why is this important? If you act like the message of Christ is only good for the corner where you find your church, you are ignoring the plan of God and not fulfilling your stewardship! You cannot, you must not, send your kids off to college without helping them see the full picture of the plan of God! The scope of this mission is the weight of our stewardship!

It was a special moment in history when William Carey called on the Baptists of England to send the gospel to the peoples of South Asia. The *Journal of Captain Cook's Last Voyage* had captured the curiosity of the next generation by opening a window to the world. Carey challenged them to put their theology into action with what would become the Modern Missions Movement.

The Internet, much like *Captain Cook's Journal*, opened up a new window to the world.

We have a stewardship to announce. It's Jesus. He's the Answer; God has a plan; He is bringing worshipers to Himself

That's a peek at what this stewardship is, but, we must end by asking another question:

2. How do we exercise this stewardship?

We know from the testimony of Scripture that we are called to **GUARD** these mysteries and to **GIVE** them away.

A. How do we protect and proclaim the message?

In Purity: We must never compromise the mystery of the gospel, the preaching of the cross. Even when it seems foolish; even when it seems weak; we understand that God is well-pleased to use the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. The wisdom of God—the mystery of Christ.

In Power:

We fulfill this stewardship by never substituting the superiority of speech, or the persuasive words of human wisdom, for the power of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the cross. We guard these mysteries by never substituting the work of the flesh for the work of The Spirit. Later in this same chapter four of First Corinthians, Paul says the kingdom of God is not in talk, but in power! (4:20)

Pastor, have you lost your sense of awe that comes with the preaching of the cross? Is your heart still overcome with joy when that man says, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner?" Or when you hear that little girl pray, "Come into my heart Lord Jesus." Have you ever known the thrill of sharing Christ with someone in a distant land? Of hearing the man in East Africa cry from his heart: "Bwana Jesu—Lord Jesus"? From the heart, we have been called to fulfill this stewardship in the power of the Spirit.

And With Priority

Our baptisms continue to fall, and we are not impacting our culture for Christ. We must acknowledge that we have inflated numbers of membership and an incredible number of people on our rolls who are inactive and probably lost.

Why aren't we finding ways to reach our cities with the gospel? Could it be that the processes we have established, that we call "organization," are really bureaucratic hindrances to mobilizing our people to the task?

B. How do we fulfill our stewardship by passionately pursuing the mission?

I remember the first time I heard Jimmy Draper preach—it was 1974. In that message, he spoke of priorities and said, "We Baptists are famous for finding ways to prop up dead horses." There are so many things that we are doing that we need to stop. We need to find a way to bury some dead horses!

Do we have the courage to ask the hard questions—to do a death check? We need to ask: "What are we doing that we need to stop doing? What **MUST** we do to pursue the mission?"

When our forefathers created the Cooperative Program, they responded to the needs of their day with an organizational structure that gave them a more efficient way to involve our churches in reaching the world for Christ. Our day is very different from theirs. Could it be that we need to radically reorganize this Convention so that we can fulfill our stewardship and reach our world in a more efficient way?

C. We must hear the call to fulfill this stewardship by the way we prioritize the money.

The North Carolina evangelist, Vance Havner, said, "What we live is what we really believe. Everything else is just religious talk."

Maybe we can learn something from our SBC statistics. In the report on our giving for 2005-2006, it is recorded that our SBC churches received over \$10.4 billion in tithes and offerings. Of that, our churches recorded that they gave almost \$1.3 million—over 12%. There is another statistic of interest in this report. Only 5% of the money was given as Cooperative Program. Less than half of the amount reported as total mission expenditures. Could it be that the churches are trying to tell us something? Are they challenging our priorities?

It is absurd for us to tell any pastor or church if they don't give it "our way" they are not fulfilling their stewardship! Every pastor and every church has to make these decisions and give an account. It is our job to demonstrate that we have the best way to fulfill the stewardship of telling the world about Christ.

I challenge you to go home and look at your church's budget and evaluate your stewardship and priorities in the light of these mysteries.

In 1925, when the Cooperative Program began, there was a goal for the state conventions to keep 50% of the money and send 50% to the Southern Baptist Convention; 83 years later, most of our states still keep a lot more than 50% of the money, while our seminary professors are underpaid and we struggle to fund our missionaries. Come on Southern Baptists. It is time to go back to your state conventions and ask them to take another look at our stewardship!

Can we really defend our bureaucracies to the next generation?

When they ask me why we do the things we do—I struggle to know how to answer. When they recognize that the city of Baghdad has as many people as the state of North Carolina, they question our stewardship. I know it is painful to hear, but we need to take a fresh look at our stewardship.

Conclusion

Many of us were privileged to experience the historic turnaround of this Convention through what has been called the Conservative Resurgence. We fought the fight of stewardship. We knew that we had to guard the mystery of God's inspired, inerrant and infallible Word. We knew that without a trustworthy Bible, we would have nothing to tell the world.

We still have a long way to go to fulfill the other dimension of our stewardship. We must not only guard it, we must give it away! I join the hosts of others who have challenged this Convention to a Great Commission Resurgence.

On that day, when William Carey preached his famous "Deathless Sermon" at the Nottingham meeting of the Northampton Association, he poured out his soul with deep conviction, pleading with his Baptist brethren to fulfill their stewardship and send the gospel to peoples of South Asia. Andrew Fuller was presiding, and it appeared as though the meeting would end with "business as usual." To Carey, that was simply unacceptable. The time had come to act! Impulsively, he grabbed his friend Fuller by the arm and asked: "Is nothing going to be done again?"

It seems like we come to these Conventions and go back home to business as usual. Are we going to gather and leave asking the same question: "Is nothing going to be done again?" Oh that God would arrest our hearts with an overwhelming sense of stewardship and give us the courage to continue this stewardship with a Great Commission Resurgence—in our lifetime. And if not in our lifetime, let the things we do make it possible for the next generation.

One day when we were in seminary, Miss Bertha Smith came to visit. My wife was privileged to spend some quality time with this retired legendary missionary from China. As Miss Bertha started to leave, she placed her hands on each of my three children and prayed that God would call them to missions. Then, she laid her hands on my wife's tummy and prayed for the baby she was carrying ... that God would call that little one to missions. When she finished praying, she looked my wife in the eye and said, "If we Southern Baptists would get serious about the Great Commission, we would pray that God would call half our children to missions and the other could stay home and pay for them and we wouldn't even need this Co-operative Program!" My wife took the prayers of that day to heart and started praying every day: "Father, I'll go anywhere any time for Your glory ... and if it's not me, it will be an honor if you will send my children." It took me a few years to join her in that prayer, but we started praying it together. It was a great honor when my first daughter left with her husband and first child to take the gospel to the Middle East. It is an honor that my second daughter is giving her life to take the gospel to the Middle East. It is an honor that my son and his family have moved to the Northwest to take the gospel to a part of this nation that desperately needs the gospel. And my fourth child and her family are committed to the Great Commission and are spending their lives supporting those committed to taking the gospel to the ends of the earth.

What about you? What about us? Does the stewardship of the mysteries of Messiah sit heavy on our hearts? Will you go anywhere any time for God's glory? And if it's not you, will you pray that He will send your children?