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I ► I WOULD MINISTER MORE BY FAITH AND LESS BY FEAR

Don't fear your weaknesses—God supplies all the strength you need. Be afraid of those moments when you think you are independently strong.

—PAUL DAVID TRIPP

God did some amazing things during the time I was pastor of Southeast Christian Church, but I was often a reluctant leader. Although I usually concealed my anxieties fairly well and I eventually became less apprehensive, fear was a character flaw I battled throughout my entire ministry.

Moses is the Old Testament character I identify with the most. When God called him to confront Pharaoh and demand the release of the Hebrew slaves, Moses was reluctant to obey. He was fearful. He couldn't see himself performing that role. He protested, "I'm not a good speaker." "No one will ever believe me." "Please send someone else."

Some mistakenly interpret insecurity as humility, but the two are vastly different. Insecurity is self-centered, while humility is God-centered. At the burning bush, the Lord did not commend

Moses for his reluctance to lead. He chastised him for his lack of faith. Humility is not self-consciousness; humility is discovering what gifts God has given to you and using them wholeheartedly for His glory, not your own.

But God was going to do more through Moses than he imagined . . . or wanted. I experienced similar apprehension, and the Lord had to remind me repeatedly to walk by faith, not by fear.

AN INTIMIDATING CALL

In 1966 when I was first called to become the minister of a new church in Louisville, Kentucky, I felt extremely inadequate and ill prepared. I grew up in the country, milking cows. Southeast Christian Church was in the suburbs of a large, sophisticated city. I grew up attending a very small church (forty people); although this new church was fairly small (around 125 people), it clearly had the potential to grow large. I only had a BA degree from a Bible college. This church had a number of PhDs and well-educated people sitting in the audience every Sunday.

I was so nervous for my trial sermon I must have rehearsed it aloud at least fifteen times. In high school I hated public speaking or even reading in front of a class. I would sometimes hyperventilate, I couldn't catch my breath and my voice would quiver. For years I feared reliving that embarrassing experience when I preached. Comedian Steven Wright once asked, "What happens if you get scared half to death twice?" I was scared half to death multiple times and still survived.

With God's help I got through the trial sermon without faltering. When I received a unanimous call to come to Louisville, I

immediately accepted it. J. Oswald Sanders wrote, “When God calls us, we cannot refuse from a sense of inadequacy. Nobody is worthy of such trust.”¹

I imagined staying for five or six years and helping the church grow to 300–400 people. Today when people visit our campus that has a million square feet of buildings, and they witness more than 20,000 people attending worship services every weekend, they often say to me, “You must have had an incredible vision for this church.” I often jokingly respond, “Well, thanks, but we’re actually a little behind what I had envisioned.”

The truth is my vision was very limited. One of my favorite passages of Scripture is Ephesians 3:20–21: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

Once I began the Louisville ministry in June 1966 there was no one more stunned at what started happening at Southeast Christian than I. As I sowed the seed of God’s Word, it began producing a bountiful harvest. The east end of Louisville was a fertile field and it was soon producing thirty, sixty and a hundredfold. I underestimated the power of God’s Word. I underestimated my giftedness to preach. I underestimated what God could do with even a reluctant leader.

Perhaps if I had dreamed bigger dreams He could have done more. But I do know that I often went kicking and screaming into projects that were so obviously God’s will that I had no option. I often felt such tension on Friday and Saturday about the upcoming sermon that I wasn’t fun to live with. If I had more faith, I wouldn’t

have been as apprehensive or as tense as I was. I could have enjoyed His blessing more.

A STRESSFUL ASSIGNMENT

Ten years into my ministry I was invited to speak to a morning session of the North American Christian Convention, the annual gathering of leaders from Independent Christian Churches. At that time it was a significant honor to be asked to speak to the entire convention—especially for a guy not yet thirty-five years old. That was almost unheard of. However, the thought of speaking to a crowd of 4,000 of my peers terrified me. This is going to sound like an exaggeration to people who think speaking came easily for me, but it isn't. I was just getting used to preaching to 500 people in my own church and the idea of speaking to a convention audience sparked tremendous tension.

I agreed to do it because it was an honor and I am supposed to walk through open doors—right? Besides, I had learned a definition of courage while playing football in high school as a 140-pound quarterback that stayed with me all my life. “Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is action in spite of fear.” I wanted to be courageous but I have to admit anxiety has often plagued me and inhibited me before taking action.

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I wasn't so sure.*

The closer the NACC date came the more I prepared and the more nervous I became. I remember going to lunch with my

college roommate, Ron Eversole, and sharing my fears with him. He assured me the Lord would be with me and once I started all butterflies would be gone. I wasn't so sure.

On July 4, 1976, my wife, Judy, and I flew from Louisville to Denver, the site of the convention. It was the 200th anniversary of America's Declaration of Independence. We left near sundown and there was not a cloud in the sky. As darkness began to settle in, we could look down and see spectacular fireworks bursting above one small town after another. The entire nation was celebrating the birth of our country beneath us. It was a glorious spectacle but I didn't enjoy it as much as I should have because of the pressure of that speech hanging like a heavy cloud over my head.

Fear of tomorrow robs today of its joy. Fear makes us irritable and inhibits our personalities. Fear stifles the Holy Spirit in our lives. Fear minimizes leadership effectiveness. Fear blinds us to the goodness of God. Corrie ten Boom said, "Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows. It empties today of its strength."²

We arrived in Denver late Sunday evening. On Monday morning I walked to the convention center to get a feel for the location where I'd be speaking later that week. When I walked into the arena hundreds of chairs were being set up and technicians were testing out the sound system. As I ambled up toward the platform a sound technician kept repeating, "Testing, one, two, three" over the PA system. Then he called to me, "Excuse me, sir, could you lend me a hand? Would you mind standing behind the podium and speaking for a few seconds so I can go hear it in the back of the room?"

I leaped at the chance to stand behind the podium and talk for a minute or two until he was satisfied and thanked me for my assistance. I walked away with a renewed confidence that after-

noon. As my wife and I made our way back to the hotel I said, “Judy, I’m not one who flippantly says, ‘The Lord caused this to happen.’ But you know how anxious I’ve been and how I’ve prayed that the Lord will calm my nerves. It’s just too much of a coincidence for me to come down here to this arena and the sound technician asks me to stand behind the podium and speak. I think that the Lord is assuring me that He’s with me and I’m going to be okay.”

When we got back to the hotel a few minutes later, I ran into Southeast Christian’s worship leader in the lobby. I explained where I’d been and told him I’d even done some trial speaking behind the podium where I was going to preach. He burst out laughing and said, “Oh, no! You were in the room where the teen session takes place—the arena where you’re speaking is much larger than that!” Suddenly my anxieties resurfaced, but the laughter at my mistake probably did more to calm my nerves than anything.

When Thursday morning came, the Lord answered my prayers and I discovered that what Ron Eversole said was true: After the first minute or so my nerves settled down, I became absorbed in what I wanted to say, and the audience responded well to the message. Most importantly God had been true to His promise, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5 *ESV*). When it was over I felt a tremendous sense of relief and was gratified that I had taken action in spite of fear.

Usually the basis of fear is too much concern over what people think and not enough trust in God’s promises. When God told Jeremiah he had appointed him as a prophet to the nations, Jeremiah protested, “‘Alas, Sovereign Lord,’ I said, ‘I do not know how to speak; I am too young.’ But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, “I am too young.” You must go to everyone I send you to and say

whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,' declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 1:6–8).

I wish I had consistently listened more to those promises of Scripture and less to the fears the enemy frequently whispered in my ear. I could have been a lot more pleasant to live with at home, and I would have enjoyed the challenges and opportunities that came my way. I could have been a more effective leader if I would have been less fearful and more joyful.

AN INVITATION TO WALK INTO THE LION'S DEN

In 1983, our church raised a million dollars in a single offering. The plan was to use that money as seed money to erect a new sanctuary on the twenty acres we had just purchased for relocation, a half-mile down the street from our present building. The story of our million-dollar offering was picked up by the local newspaper and then became a front-page story in *USA Today*. My picture was on the front of *USA Today* under the headline, "Churches' One Million Dollar Sundays."

A few days later I received a phone call from the producer of the *Phil Donahue Show* inviting me to appear on his television program to talk about "Raising Big Bucks for Churches." Phil Donahue in the eighties could be compared to HBO's Bill Maher today. He was definitely not favorable to the gospel. His producer said, "I want you to know in advance, there will be people on the same panel who will disagree with what you are doing."

The last thing in the world I wanted to do was to go on Phil Donahue and be attacked by him and his cronies. I was petrified at the idea. What if I stumbled and stammered or hyperventilated

and quivered? I would embarrass the people who had sacrificed of their hard-earned money to advance God's kingdom. But was God wanting me to share His Word on national television? If so, I knew I should do it. Courage is not absence of fear but action in spite of fear.

I sought counsel from our elders about the invitation and after considerable discussion they advised me not to accept the offer. It would be too hostile an environment. It would be "casting your pearls before swine." (I was glad someone found a Scripture verse to relieve my guilt and justify my fears!) So I turned down the invitation. I still wonder if that was a cowardly decision. Perhaps if I hadn't been so apprehensive the elders would have responded differently. I think the apostle Paul would have gone.

Over the years I did accept other invitations to be on talk shows that were adversarial and to participate in events that were challenging. But I dreaded each opportunity. I repeatedly read Jesus' admonition about not worrying about what I was going to say but trust the Holy Spirit to provide the right words—but somehow my faith was too small. I was always anxious. I wish I hadn't been apprehensive, because God was always true to His promise to provide.

Worry says, "I don't think He will be there when I need Him."

Worry is a sin because it calls God a liar. God promises He will supply all our needs (Philippians 4:19). Worry says, "I don't think God will fulfill that promise." God says He is with us always (Matthew 28:20). Worry says, "I don't think He will be there when I need Him." God promises when we're called to testify before au-

thorities, “Do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say for it will not be you speaking but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matthew 10:18–20). Worry says I might say something really stupid.

Oswald Chambers wrote, “It’s not only wrong to worry, it is infidelity, because worry means that we do not think that God can look after the details of our lives.”³ Faith is trusting God to fulfill His promises. Worry is disbelief and an insult to God. I wish I would have trusted more because over and over again I discovered God’s promises are true.

A FAINTHEARTED DECISION CONCERNING THE SIZE OF A NEW SANCTUARY

When our first relocation project began, I intentionally wasn’t on the building committee. I hate long meetings, am not gifted in aesthetics, and have no passion for details, so I don’t belong on a

building committee. I’d also seen too many ministers become distracted and lose their focus during a building project. The preacher becomes a lightning rod for disagree-

***“Your faith is too small.
You preach. We’ll build.”***

ment and after the building is built, his ministry is soon over.

So I wasn’t on the building committee. But I did communicate two requests to Jack Coffee, the chairman. I said, “I’d like the sanctuary seating to be in a semicircle and I’d like for it to seat no more than 1,500 people.” I explained, “We’re running a little over a thousand in attendance now in a building that seats 450. With 1,500 seats in the new auditorium we can accommodate 3,000 in dual

services. I don't think we'll ever get any larger than that. But if we have more than 1,500 seats we will rattle around in the huge space on Sunday nights and Wednesday nights."

Jack raised an eyebrow, frowned at me and scolded, "Your faith is too small. You preach. We'll build." A few months later the building committee approved a sanctuary design that seated 2,500 people and I was not pleased. However, by the time we occupied that building two years later we had to have dual services and we averaged over 4,000 the first year. I wish my faith had been greater and my fears had been smaller.

AN UNEXPECTED CONFIDENCE BOOSTER

One winter in the early nineties I awakened in the middle of the night and was unable to sleep. I got up, went downstairs, and decided to watch a video of a sermon Chuck Colson had preached at Southeast about a year before. We had three services at the time and Chuck had agreed to preach for two of them. Due to his health challenges, Chuck requested that I preach the middle service that Sunday.

After watching the video of Chuck Colson's excellent sermon, I started to turn off the tape when suddenly my face appeared on the screen. We had made a special effort to video that morning (which had not been our practice), since we had a special guest. I didn't realize our tech crew had also taped my sermon as well.

Since I was still wide awake, I decided to watch it. I hadn't watched myself on video very often and that message was over a year old, so I didn't remember much about it. Most preachers will

agree that it's easier to be objective about a message when you're not as familiar with its content.

As I watched and listened at three in the morning, I realized, "This is pretty good! Wow! This is better than I imagined it was at the time." When it was finished, I gulped and thought, "That's not me! That's not me! That's an anointing of the Holy Spirit! God speaks through me! He's doing more than I imagined!"

I'm not a frequent crier, but I couldn't hold back the tears that night. I hurried into a nearby bathroom and sobbed. I kept asking, "God, what have You done to me?" That experience was a big confidence booster to me, because that night I realized that while there are many preachers more talented than I, I was not a one-talent man who had been planted in a fertile field. God had really anointed me to preach and had given me the opportunity to preach in a fertile field. That meant I had a heavy responsibility. But I need not be afraid.

I wish I could say I've never had a moment of fear since, but I am a continual sinner. However, my faith has grown and my confidence is still growing even today. But I do wish I had less fear and more faith because "God is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine."

A MASSIVE BUILDING PROGRAM AND THE DREADED FUNDRAISER

In the early nineties Southeast Christian exploded to 6,000 people in worship on Sunday morning. We had already outgrown our new facilities in four years. We added a Saturday night service. We included a closed-circuit service in the fellowship hall. We were

once again shuttling people who had to park at local schools and shopping centers.

Just four years after relocating, those of us in leadership began asking, “Could it be God’s will for us to relocate again?” That was almost an unthinkable challenge at the time. We were still \$3 million in debt. We had just barely had time to catch our breath and settle into our new building. The carpet still smelled new.

We began to pray and discuss the possibility of picking up our tents and moving on again. We put out several “fleeces” that we all agreed on. If we were to relocate we would need a hundred acres of ground adjacent to an intersection on the interstate. The price of the land would have to be less than \$40,000 an acre. It would need to be within ten miles of our present site. We’d have to get overwhelming congregational approval. We would need to increase mission giving 1 percent per year during the construction project, beginning with the current practice of sharing 10 percent annually. That would demonstrate that we hadn’t lost our outward focus.

We debated for a year about what was the right thing to do. On a staff retreat an associate minister said, “Bob, people are just waiting for you to take the lead and say, ‘Let’s go for it.’ They’re ready to follow you.”

That night while praying in my room at the lodge I came to grips with the fact that was true. And that’s a heavy burden. This was a HUGE step. Shortly afterward I sought the counsel of several ministers I deeply respected. Maybe I was still looking for a way out. But they each encouraged me to go for it. “We need someone paving the way,” one of them said.

A relocation committee was formed. After a few months they announced that a hundred acres of land had become available at

the intersection of I-64 and Blankenbaker Parkway, on the east side of Louisville. The cost of the land fell within our parameters. I remember my knees quaking as I announced to the church that we were going to vote in two weeks to purchase a hundred acres of ground for the purpose of relocating again. You could hear a pin drop.

Two weeks later the congregation voted 94 percent in favor of relocating. Many churches couldn't get 94 percent to vote in favor of Jesus returning! The land was purchased and an architect hired. Then came the step that makes almost every preacher apprehensive—a capital campaign.

Every preacher who has been through a building project wrestles with the fears. Are we walking by faith or being presumptuous? Will we retain the same spirit in the larger facility? Will I have to talk so much about money that the congregation will be turned off? Can we keep our focus on Christ and not the building?

We needed to raise \$26 million over a three-year period for the financial package to work. We were told by our financial advisors that it was the largest church fundraiser they knew of at that time. Our annual budget then was \$8 million dollars, so we were attempting to more than double our budget the next three years.

I got some discouraging notes in the mail from some knowledgeable businessmen. "I've done the numbers and they don't add up." "If we raise \$26 million it will be the biggest miracle I've ever seen."

Our financial consultant insisted for the project to be successful I needed to do three things as the leader—none of which I wanted to do. (1) Preach four straight sermons on giving. (Wouldn't that be overkill?) (2) Approach twelve donors who had the potential to give

leadership gifts and ask them for an advance, generous donation. (We could offend some of our most loyal givers.) (3) Announce to the congregation what I personally was going to pledge toward the project. (Wasn't that being boastful? Wasn't giving supposed to be in secret?)

But I agreed to follow the guidelines of the experts, and the capital campaign proved to be a tremendous blessing. Our congregation rallied and committed \$31 million—\$5 million over the goal, and amazingly, over 100 percent was donated. It ignited a spirit of revival in the church. Again, all my fears were unfounded.

In his older years Moses taught Joshua and the Israelites a lesson he had learned, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6).

If I could do ministry again I would have less fear and trust God to be true to His promise in my life.