
Chapter Seventeen
AN EPILEPTIC CORPSE

Following my failure, I submitted myself to the Assemblies of God in hopes they might consider placing me in the program of ministerial rehabilitation. They rejected me. Returning to the ministry was of secondary interest to me. I applied because I needed help. Six months later I applied again and they relented. I entered a two-year program during which the critical spirit, ingrained from the Church of the Risen Christ experience, was mostly healed. Doc Dobbins helped me understand how dangerously self-destructive and, indeed, non-biblical such attitudes are. This was the same two-year program Jimmy Swaggart refused, saying his ministry would fall apart if he sat out for two years. Hey Jimmy, if any person, leaving a ministry, causes that ministry to fall apart then Jesus was never the center of it.

To its credit, the AG's program of reclamation for fallen clergy has redemption as its mandate. Elements of discipline and rehabilitation are applied with dual intent. First, two broken people with a matching marriage needed fixing. Second, a minister must be reconstructed from the ground up. The program provided some much needed structure for my life. I needed shaking from my fog. I was told where to attend church: Burton Assembly of God. They were 10 miles from North Bloomfield and, in the country, that's a morning walk. I would report, weekly, to Pastor Ken Patrick. Ego blow. In the secret place of my heart I fancied myself more spiritually evolved than he. That's why it was so

perfect. Mandated church attendance and homework assignments from Ken kept us in intimate contact with church officials. But I wasn't allowed to speak for one year. Nowhere, nothing. The beginning of the second year allowed me to teach Sunday school under supervision, under the watchful eye of the Deacons. But it was OK. Some important people believed in me enough to take a chance.

I supported myself driving machine-shop materials for Astro Model in Eastlake, a business owned by parents of Shannon's school friend. At home we founded Grand River Alpines. After a decade of study and raising dairy goats, the Ohio Department of Agriculture labeled us with the highest "rolling herd average" for French Alpines in the State of Ohio. Importing breeding stock from California, Missouri and New York the entire enterprise generally paid for itself through milk sales and breeding fees. We took two animals, Fancy and Misty, to the American Dairy Goat Association's official show at the Geauga County Fair. Between them they each took first place in their class finishing as Champion, Grand Champion, Reserve Grand Champion, Best of Breed and Best of Show. I felt like the Jim Thorpe of capriculture.

Our neighbor had an insurance policy that paid \$25,000 for Shannon's death. It never crossed my mind to sue him. He was my brother in Christ. With the money I purchased high-end studio recording equipment, converting the outbuilding closest to the house into a complete, four-track studio. We wanted to use the money to, in some way, bless others. I recorded an album, "He Calls Me Still" using sound tracks and individual musicians. I also did work for the church choir and recorded teaching tapes for people. It was great therapy for me and the kids loved it. It was a lot more fun than hoeing the garden. In the evenings we gathered round and I read portions of the book "Walk Across America" to my little ones. It was an idyllic time both necessary and deserved. Completing the AG program, I was reinstated as a minister. Whatever Fates ruled our universe, we were apportioned one more year of this sunshine. We should never have left.

Three years after I entered the program I received a call from a board member of a small church in Carrollton, Ohio. They had my resume, sent from the District office. He wanted to know if I might be interested in talking to them about their pastoral vacancy. He was quick to tell me

they could only afford to pay \$250 per week, \$11,000 per year. With five children, that wasn't a lot of money but we weren't thinking about cash. We were looking for the will of God. It's amazing how many pastoral candidates see the will of God as colored green. Equally amazing are those who see poverty as a sure sign they are more spiritually correct than their "materialistic" brethren. Sandy and I set an appointment to meet with them.

We soon discovered my resume was passed over on two, separate occasions with this same group of men. They kept processing resumes and people kept turning them down. No one wanted to pastor their church. District Headquarters continued sending my resume in every packet until the District Superintendent called them. "Why don't you give this guy a look?" They reasoned that a man with five children would be unwilling to pastor their church with the small stipend they were able to generate. He told them they should leave that in God's hands. I wasn't their first, second or third choice. So what? There was only one thing we wanted to know: "Is this God?" After the interview and prayer they invited us to minister at both Sunday services, two weeks later.

The Carrollton Assembly of God was an epileptic corpse: a lot of jerkin' going on but no real signs of life. Intransigent believers and full-time provocateurs they were one of the oldest AG churches in Ohio. For most of forty years they'd been unable to grow beyond 30 or 40 souls in a county of 25,000. The two story, stucco church building protruded from the side of a steep embankment. Dumping fill material over the side, bringing it up to a level grade, created the parking lot. Property, building and contents were later evaluated at \$15,000. Their "tithe and offerings" provided the corporation with about \$25,000 per year. Of the 20 people in attendance the morning I preached, two of them, 10% of the congregation, were mentally retarded adults. One woman in the back didn't even have her dress zipped and she was one of the "normal" ones. These statements of cold fact, from a *huge* supporter of disabled people, help paint the picture of what they'd dealt with for decades. No pastor remained here more than five years. An old, coal-mining town in the Ohio Valley, Carrollton was in no hurry to change anything. But these folks were in need of two things, only one of which was apparent to them: a pastor and a revolution. Already turned down by people they preferred, they asked me to fill those shoes. Now 37 years old, it was

three years to the very day since I'd left North Bloomfield. The true value of forgiveness lies in the fact that there are no limits to second chances. Where would any of us be if there were?

The work in Carrollton was a struggle from day one. The District Superintendent warned me. It was so sad. They were such, good-hearted people but they seemed destined to feast on a diet of clergy and gentle hearts. Knowing this present congregation couldn't remain intact and grow into a vibrant community that might influence the entire county for Christ, I determined to follow the biblical admonition to "speak the truth in love." But there was a fundamental and undetected problem with that plan. Like the influence of cancer on a cell, my time in the "school of the prophets" influenced my understanding of its two, primary components: truth and love. Overemphasizing either is a detriment to the other and leads only to error.

Why would a person choose to return to ministry when life was becoming so grand without it? How does anyone explain any obsession to the intellectual satisfaction of others? "When I run I feel His pleasure," is how Eric Liddell described his obsession during the 1924 Olympic Games. That described preaching for me and explains, as much as possible, why I wanted to return to the ministry. Labeled, "the exquisite agony," preaching presumes to be the expression of God's invisible thoughts in the mouths of corruptible men. It's a powerful thing. But preaching and ministry are not synonymous. With long lists of disciplined and discharged clergymen, the histories of every denomination chronicle the fact that some of the world's greatest preachers absolutely stink as ministers.

Preaching demands I stand in front of people, open the hole in my face and let the brilliance pour out. Ministry demands I keep my pretentious mouth closed, live among them and help shoulder their burdens. Ministry is burden lifting and load lightening, pouring "oil and wine" into their wounds. Ministry that does not heal is not. Tragically, the road to heaven is littered with the corpses of innocents wounded beyond repair by some heavy-handed preacher speaking the truth in love. I had no idea how poorly prepared I was to pastor any church.

I was Moses and I was going to Canaan. If you wanted to come along, fine. If not, please make room for those God is about to bring. If you don't like it, I don't care. Leave. There's only one Church and that Church wouldn't be diminished, just rearranged. Let the hard hearts leave and make room for the tender hearts already headed our way. I was a firm believer that God sometimes grows His Kingdom by subtraction and division as well as multiplication and addition. The vine must often be pruned before it realizes its potential. Firmly believing such unpleasant "wet work" was part of my divine mandate, I set about cutting my own throat. My family would be forced to bathe in the blood. And so it began.

One member told me, "Our last pastor had more love in his little finger than you have in your entire body." "If he was that good," I responded, "why did you drive him out?" I'd already spoken to the previous pastor. Kicked out of their home, they never returned to church. Good. One down. Another woman confided that her new husband was sexually molesting both son and daughter from a previous marriage. Doing the best I could to help them walk through the nightmare I was obligated, by law and conscience, to report the abuse to the authorities. He was arrested and convicted. She stopped attending church and word filtered back through the small town grapevine that I messed up her family.

One gentleman would sit on the front pew, pick his nose and eat it during my sermons. I wanted to ask if he brought enough for the entire class but thought he might not appreciate my humor. This same gentleman asked to meet with me, suggesting he was leaving because we weren't doing enough for poor people. I asked him where he was when we were collecting money and passing out food baskets during the holidays as well as our ongoing contributions to the community. Telling him, "I haven't seen you around anything requiring money or time," we lost him too. I was on a roll.

People leaving the church had plenty of options in Carrollton. A long list of independent, Pentecostal churches cluttered the hills and hollers. They were all possessed of the same spiritual arrogance found at the Church of the Risen Christ: "If you *really* want spiritual food and *really* want to serve God and your community then you'll be part of our thing. We're the real deal. Look how loud we talk in tongues while bouncing,

mindlessly, up and down to a *really* different drummer." These local congregations aligned themselves with big time, Christian T.V. personalities to gain some slight scrap of credibility in a coal-mining region. Combined, they added zero value to the greater body of Christ by their independence. Their maladroit duplicity is what enabled people like the Bakkers to rob believers of zillions of dollars. To them, *I* was organized religion.

I was no easier on visiting clergy. An evangelist began upbraiding people with weight problems. There were two in our congregation and they hated themselves for their obesity. "Remember when we used to call it fat?" he asked. "Now we just call it fluffy." His contextual message was, fat is bad. But it wasn't bad because of health issues. It's bad because it's a clear sign that you are a lazy compromiser. "At least we used to be honest about it," he suggested. Sitting on the front pew [sans nasal scavenger] I shocked the congregation when I raised my hand and interrupted him. "Excuse me, are you going anywhere with this? If not, I'd like you to move on." A clever, profoundly spiritual response wasn't included in his notes so he said, "Excuse me?" Smiling, I looked across the room. "Next subject please." A.J. was my friend but these people were my charge. I knew something about preaching that pummels. If it needed done, I was the one to do it.

Television, radio, newspaper articles; I did everything I could to let the entire county know there was a fresh wind blowing in Carrollton. God, who is always faithful, brought the increase. Numbers don't matter but, when I left them seven years later, they owned five acres of property and a building valued at more than a half million dollars with a congregation capable of supporting it. Their standing in the community and thus their ability to impact that community was greatly strengthened.

Henry Hyde hit the nail on the head: "America is hungry for someone who believes in something." In spite of my tactics, we outgrew the building within a year and launched a building fund. By the end of the third year the people were giving almost \$100,000 annually. But if this monumental project were to succeed, it would require a lot from all of us. I found a piece of property just east of town with large frontage on the main road. I was counseled, "If you need to put up a sign on the busiest street that says, "Assembly of God one block over," you're one

block too far away." The elderly woman who owned the property lived in Michigan. Sandy and I drove to Michigan to present our offer. It wasn't much. We could come up with a \$10,000 down payment but would they be willing to finance the rest? We didn't have \$10,000 at the time. A land contract is what we were looking for. They agreed but by the time of signing we'd raised the entire amount. One person, one of the new people in the church, gave the balance. We now had a choice, debt-free location on which to build.

Flying to Assembly of God headquarters in Springfield, Missouri I met with architects employed by the denomination. The end result yielded a complete set of blueprints for \$500. Hiring a local architect to bring them up to local building codes and also design the septic system, we paid a total of \$3,000 for approved, architectural drawings on a half million dollar project. A loan from the AG for \$200,000 gave us the ability to come out of the Stone Age. The balance we raised ourselves.

Acting as the general contractor I put huge miles on our leased vehicle. Hiring the help and purchasing everything down to the last nail I did what I could to help. Unable to hold a hammer I saved them 10's of thousands of dollars by shouldering the work. It was like pulling teeth. Other than a few families most people were sporadic in their assistance but the only way we could do this was by doing it ourselves. Tensions started to build.

The Carrollton Assembly of God nurtured secret grudges. Several key families resented the dismantling of their backward congregation and it began to wear on me. "God didn't bring you here for all these new people," one Christian crank told me. "He brought you here to minister *to us*, the people who held this thing together all these years." God Himself hadn't been able to help them in 40 years and I didn't imagine there was much I was going to accomplish.

Another woman in the church epitomized their behavior. When I arrived, she was Sunday school superintendent, Choir leader, church secretary, treasurer and piano player. She was poison disguised as honey. Her mother died and, as pastor for both women, I embraced their sorrow. Spending days and weeks in hospital rooms prior to her mother's death and doing everything in my power to rally church, family and friends I

also conducted the services at the funeral home and gravesite: typical Pastor stuff. Morticians in Carrollton added a \$25 stipend to the funeral cost explaining it as a gratuity for the clergymen. Twenty-five dollars doesn't pay for the gas in most of these cases. Never requested, it was simply a courtesy to clergy and family. She declined indicating to the funeral home director they would prefer to take care of it personally. Leaving the cemetery, she flashed her car lights in my mirror. Stopping the car her husband came running up saying, "We wanted to give you something. Thanks." It was a ten-dollar bill. The money meant nothing but I now had a clear idea of the worth they put on their pastors. When this same woman went into the hospital herself she approached our assistant pastor saying, "Will you please visit me? I don't want *that man* anywhere near me." It seemed they all felt that way. I'd been with people who laid their lives on the line for the cause of Christ, sacrificed everything and asked what more might be done. These people wanted a talk show host pastor as shallow as themselves and a faith that didn't make too many demands.

Pastors pour out their lives for people who just don't give a damn. That would be O.K. if they didn't pat you on the back with one hand and stab you in the back with the other. I joked, "A local newspaper reported finding the body of Pastor Markko beside the road with hundreds of knife wounds in his back. Church members declared it suicide." Compelled by a love for God, loyalty to his calling and concern for people who are their own worst enemies, a pastor keeps plugging away. In spite of negative press for wayward clergy there are thousands of men and women going to their office everyday who fall on their face before God and do nothing but good. Wanting desperately to be that kind of man, the constant unhappiness of the congregants broke my heart. The ministry and I were proving incongruent due to the absence of a single, political bone in my body. It must have been a birth defect.

But there was something else going on, something only God and I knew about. Like a slow moving storm my yesterdays were catching up to me. Why it happened at this point in my life is something that must be deciphered by mental health professionals. At 41, perhaps it was the fabled mid-life crisis but all the random, unfair issues of my life now came together in an avalanche of emotional and psychological anguish. Every mirror and window capable of reflecting an image reminded me of

my body. I saw myself as a grotesque oddity. True, the burns had spared my face but the massive, deforming scar tissue concealed beneath my clothing began to take its toll on my spirit. One of the remaining fingers on my hand atrophied until it curled back, pushing into the palm. People were as uncomfortable shaking my hand as I was knowing they'd rather not. It wasn't imagination or speculation. Through the years people have made fun of me, teenagers have laughed at me and women have mocked me. It goes with the territory. But all of that began to crush me leaving me feeling unwanted, everywhere. I couldn't really blame my wife for losing physical interest in me. I got it. The church didn't want me, my wife didn't want me, my children didn't need me and I couldn't stand me. Is there no end to this? I was running low on courage and a heavy depression was settling in. Opting for surgery to fix the growing deformity on the end of my arm was a last resort. Being put to sleep terrifies me, forcing my entire psyche into a fetal position. If I had a thumb to suck on I'm certain I would have.

Tolkien wrote about the Mines of Moriah, a dark and dreadful place filled with terror, death and darkness. The Balrog, terrifying and invincible, waited for every fool who entered. Moriah lay before me and my Balrog was lurking around the next dark corner. When I began writing, I knew this would prove the most difficult to reveal and, for six years, I've done everything I can to avoid it. Six years to work up the courage to say, "As a dog returns to his vomit, so a fool returns to his folly."ⁱ Traveling to Cleveland for surgeries and follow-up, I was at the lowest point of my life. What's the use? I stepped into a bar. I want desperately to write, "The end," but I cannot. There are lessons to be learned.

ⁱ Proverbs 26:11, King James Bible