

9. Having Begun in the Spirit

by Chuck Smith

The sermon emphasizes the necessity of beginning and continuing in the Spirit for effective ministry and spiritual vitality.

Scripture: Exodus 3:11, Judges 6:14, Jeremiah 9:23-24, Zechariah 4:6, Luke 10:21, Romans 8:31, 1 Corinthians 1:26-29, 1 Corinthians 4:7, 2 Corinthians 3:5-6, Galatians 3:3

Topics: "Dependence on the Spirit", "Avoiding Ritualism"

Description

Chuck Smith emphasizes that every great movement of God, including Calvary Chapel, begins in the Spirit but often shifts to reliance on human effort, leading to ritualism and stagnation. He draws parallels from church history and the Book of Judges, illustrating how the Israelites repeatedly turned away from God after experiencing His deliverance. Smith highlights the importance of remaining dependent on the Spirit, using examples from Moses and Gideon, who were initially hesitant and felt inadequate but were empowered by God. He warns against the temptation to seek perfection in the flesh, urging believers to continue in the Spirit for true effectiveness in ministry. Ultimately, the message is a call to recognize our limitations and rely solely on God's sufficiency.

Transcript

"Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit..."

II Corinthians 3:5-6

Calvary Chapel is a work that was begun by the Spirit. Every new and great movement of God is born of the Spirit. When we examine church history and the various great movements of God, we discover they were all born in the Spirit. Yet such moves of God historically seem to move from that birth in the Spirit to ultimately seeking to be perfected in the flesh. This seems to be a continual cycle in the history of the church. Movements that were once alive in the Spirit become dead in ritualism.

Ritualism is nothing more than a rut, and the only difference between a rut and a grave is the length and the depth. We see the energies of the church expended in life-support systems designed to keep a corpse still gasping for breath. The whole purpose seems to be concentrated in not letting the movement die. We believe that if a program cannot survive on its own, the most merciful thing to do is let it die.

In the Book of Judges we read of the continuing cycle of infidelity on the part of the Israelites. It's almost disgusting to see how the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and how the Lord gave them over to their enemies. They would be in bondage, and then, after about forty years, they would cry to the Lord. God would hear them and would send a deliverer, and things would go great for a while. But then, the children of Israel would do evil again in the sight of the Lord, and again they would go into captivity. We see this same cycle in our lives. When things are going great, we have a tendency to slack off. And then when we get into trouble, we cry unto the Lord. Every time I read Judges, I get upset with the children of Israel. I think, "How can you turn your back on the Lord? Can't you see what's going on? Can't you see the cycle that is taking place?"

As I look at church history, I see much the same thing. God raises up a new movement. It's born of the Spirit. There's excitement and revival. There's a powerful moving of the Spirit. Consider some of the modern movements, when God used men like John Wesley and Martin Luther. It is evident that the power and the anointing of the Spirit were on their lives. Yet when we examine the Methodist and Lutheran churches today, with few exceptions, they are laced with modernism. There is a great dearth of the Spirit, even a denying of the power and gifts of the Spirit. But the movements were born of the Spirit. And so goes the history of the church. God raises up a new work and begins a new movement. Calvary Chapel happens to be in the first part of the cycle. The Spirit of God moved, and is moving, and has raised up a new work. It was begun in the Spirit. As the Lord said to Zechariah, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts." (Zechariah 4:6).

Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia, churches begun in the Spirit, and chided them. "Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3). God will go to tremendous lengths to make certain that His chosen leaders rely on the Spirit and not on their own power and wisdom. It's interesting to observe the men whom God has used, the men that He has raised up to lead the people in the way of the Lord.

Moses is one example. You remember the story of the burning bush. When God called him, Moses initially objected, saying, "Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11). Moses said, "Lord, I don't have any confidence. Who am I? I've been out here for forty years." I imagine that he expected to spend the rest of his life simply watching sheep. He figured that was his lot in life. So when the Lord called him, he responded, "Who am I? I don't have any confidence, Lord."

Now, it's interesting that he started out with a lot of confidence, but the Lord knocked it out of him. It's interesting that he had a sense of destiny at one time. Stephen tells us that he thought Israel would understand that God had chosen him to lead them, but they didn't until the second time around (Acts 7). It's a good illustration of the difference between the work of the flesh and the work of the Spirit. Moses first endeavored to do the work of God in the energies of his flesh, but in his own power he couldn't even successfully bury one Egyptian. Yet when he was directed by the Spirit, Israel succeeded in burying the whole army of the Egyptians.

I think most of us can relate to Moses' experience. We so often begin in the flesh to fulfill what we feel the call of God is upon our life. We so often start out in the flesh and find ourselves unsuccessful. I think that when a person fails in the flesh, he often heads for the desert and leaves the ministry, many times never to return. He becomes discouraged and defeated, because he tried in the ability of his flesh to fulfill what he genuinely felt was the call of God upon his heart.

Moses did just that. He felt the call of God upon his heart. He knew that God had ordained him for a purpose, but then he found himself out in the desert for forty years. During this time, he lost his self-worth and the confidence of what God could do through him. He knew that when he had all the cards on his side, he had failed. But God's answer to Moses' objection was, "Certainly I will be with thee;" (Exodus 3:12). To me, that's glorious! "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

Then Moses answered and said, "But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The LORD hath not appeared unto thee." (Exodus 4:1). In other words he was saying, "Lord, I don't have credibility. They're not going to believe me. They're just going to say that the Lord hasn't talked to you." God's response to Moses' objection was, "What is in your hand?" He said, "A rod." God said, "Throw it on the ground." And then, through a series of signs, the Lord assured him that He would be with him.

In the tenth verse of chapter four, Moses said unto the Lord, "O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue." Moses pleaded, "I have no ability. I'm not eloquent. I have slow speech and a slow tongue." To this objection God said, "Who made man's mouth? Who gave you the ability to speak?" God is able to overcome our disabilities. He's the one who created our mouths to begin with.

And then in verse thirteen, he said, "O my Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send." In other words, "Lord, get someone else to do the job. I have no desire. I don't want to do it. Just get someone else." Here is where the Lord became upset with Moses and went to an alternate plan. He used Aaron to be Moses' spokesman, but that was God's alternate plan. It's sad, but we often miss God's best and force Him to choose Plan B.

I do believe in a direct will and a permissive will of God. I believe that God will lift us to the highest level that we will allow, and do the best for us on that level. But I also believe that often times we force God to our level rather than being elevated to His. We bring God down in a compromise to our level of commitment.

Look what God had to go through in order to get this man Moses, a man with no confidence, no credibility, no ability, and no desire, yet chosen by God to deliver the people.

In the Book of Judges, when the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord and began to worship false gods, God delivered them into the hands of the Midianites. The Midianites covered the land like grasshoppers. They took the crops as soon as they were ready to harvest. The children of Israel began to cry unto the Lord because of their bondage and misery. So the Lord sent His angel to Gideon who was threshing wheat by a wine press to hide it from the Midianites. The angel of the Lord said to Gideon, "Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites:" (Judges 6:14). And Gideon responded, "Oh my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? Behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." (Judges 6:15). "Lord, you're scraping the bottom of the barrel. My family is poor and I'm the least of my family."

He thought he was disqualifying himself, but in reality he was qualifying himself because he was the kind of a person God was looking for. God desired to use a person who knew that he didn't have the capacity or the ability to accomplish the deliverance of a nation, a person who knew he would have to rely upon the Lord if anything was to be done. God also had to bring Moses to this place so that He could use him.

When we don't have confidence in our own power, we know that if the work is going to be done, it has to be done by the Lord. When I felt the call of God on my life to the ministry, I went to Bible College and prepared myself. While in Bible college, I was Senior Class President, Student Body President, and I developed an athletic program for the school. I really felt that I had an awful lot to offer. When I started out in the ministry, I was certain that I had all the qualifications and background to build a successful church anywhere.

I had great confidence, but the Lord put me through the ringer. He allowed me to struggle for seventeen years with no success. I had to work in a secular job in order to support my family so I could stay in the ministry. If it weren't for that sense of the call of God upon my life, I would have given up. In fact, I endeavored to leave the ministry on a couple of occasions, but the Lord brought me back. This all had to happen because of the confidence I had in my own abilities.

The Lord allowed me to spend the prime years of my life failing, until He finally got me to the place where I realized that I really had nothing to offer. Then I began to simply lean on the Spirit and depend upon Him. It was then that I was able to watch God work by His Spirit. I wasn't tempted to take the glory for what God was doing. He brought me to the cross and emptied me of myself and my ambitions. When God began to work by His Spirit, it became a joyful, thrilling experience just to see what God was able to do.

Many times there is the necessity for this emptying process. When Gideon said, "Lord, my family is one of the poorest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family," rather than disqualifying himself, he was actually affirming that God had found the kind of a man He was looking for, one who would not take credit or glory for the victories, but would give God the glory.

It's interesting that when God did use Gideon, and the Midianites were scattered and defeated, that they came to Gideon and said, "Rule thou over us... And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you." (Judges 8:22-23). That's the kind of man God was looking for.

I look at the men that God gathered around David. Everyone was in distress, in debt, and discontented. They gathered themselves to him and he became the captain. They were a bunch of malcontents and losers, about 400 men, but God raised these men into a mighty army.

I also look at the men that God gathered around me and I sort of chuckle as I see the ones that God has used. They're much like David's men, sort of the outcasts and cast-offs of society, and yet look what God has done.

When God called Jeremiah, he responded, "Ah, Lord GOD! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child." (Jeremiah 1:6). When Jesus called His disciples, He chose fishermen and a tax-collector. He didn't go to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and say, "Now, Gamaliel, who are your sharpest and finest students here?" He went to the Sea of Galilee and called these fishermen.

So Calvary Chapel is not the first time that God has used society's cast-offs to do a wonderful work. But it's interesting and somewhat sad that once God begins to use us, we start looking for reasons why God would use us. We try to become perfected in the flesh.

Writing to the Corinthians Paul said, "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called." (I Corinthians 1:26). He's calling them to observe

that God hasn't called many qualified people - not many wise, after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble. He goes on to say, "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are:" (I Corinthians 1:27-28).

He then gives us the reason in I Corinthians 1:29, "that no flesh should glory in His presence." The whole purpose of God is to choose those who really aren't qualified, but then to anoint them with His Spirit. Then, when the results are forthcoming, it's an amazement and a wonder to the world. He doesn't desire that any flesh should glory in His presence.

Luke tells us in chapter ten that the disciples returned with excitement over the work of God through their lives. In that hour, while they were talking about it, Jesus was rejoicing in His Spirit. And He said, "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight." (Luke 10:21). Jesus was thanking the Father that He hid these things from the wise and the prudent and revealed them unto the simple people, because it seemed good in His sight.

It's interesting that having begun in the Spirit, so often, we then seek to be perfected in the flesh. Some of the Calvary Chapel pastors have gone back to school. Some of the schools were quite anxious to have them because of their success in the ministry. They wanted to be able to point to them as having received degrees from their programs, and to be associated with their success in the ministry. The schools were anxious to get them, so they offered them life experience credits.

They were able to take a few courses, and with all their life experience credits get their degrees. Now the schools point to them as classic examples of the success of their graduates. Some of the fellows went back to school to get these degrees because when you're interviewed, they're always asking, "What degrees do you have?" and it is kind of embarrassing to say, "Well I don't have any degree."

"What seminary did you attend?"

"I didn't attend seminary."

"What university did you attend?"

"Well, I didn't quite make my High School Diploma."

It can be embarrassing to admit that you don't have the educational background. When "Who's Who" writes you and says that you've been selected to be in this year's edition, they want to know what degrees you have and what universities you attended because man wants to be able to say, "Well, look this man has a Ph.D." Somehow we feel we can be perfected and even prepared in the flesh. We've begun in the Spirit and the only way to have continuing success is to continue in the Spirit.

In Matthew 11:25, "Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes." It's interesting how we try to disqualify ourselves from the revelation of God's truths by becoming wise and prudent. Jesus was rejoicing that His Father didn't reveal these truths unto the wise and prudent, but unto babes so that the glory might go to God.

When Gideon was ready to go out against the Midianites, he was greatly outnumbered. There were at least 135,000 Midianites and he had only 32,000 men who mustered to the first call. But God said, "The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me." (Judges 7:2). The Lord is saying that He can't do it with the 32,000. You see God wants to work, but God wants the glory for the work that He does. That's why He uses the simple things of this world in order to confound the wise. People can only look on, shake their heads, and say, "I don't understand it, but God's anointing is there. God is sure using them." I wonder how many times the work that God wants to do is hindered because God can't find simple men. All He has is a bunch of Ph.D.s out here.

Now, I've been accused of being anti-intellectual. Even Calvary Chapel is often branded as anti-intellectual. I suppose I am guilty, but I don't apologize for it. I do believe in education. My own life has been a life of study. The Scripture tells us to "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (II Timothy 2:15). I believe that God uses human instruments, and that He prepares the instruments that He uses. I believe that it's important to be prepared in the Word of God, but not from a purely natural humanistic standpoint. True education doesn't come from the wisdom of the world, but by the guidance and the wisdom that comes from the Holy Spirit.

When the disciples stood before the religious council, the council marveled at their understanding of the Scripture. They observed that they had been with Jesus. Likewise, when we spend time with Jesus in His Word, we'll get all we need to prepare us for service and for ministry. You don't need four years of seminary and a Ph.D. Many times they can be a greater hindrance than a blessing. I believe that the title 'Doctor' puts a wall between you and the people, which makes you less effective in ministering to them. People will put you on a pedestal the moment that they say, 'Doctor.' You put yourself in an element above them, and they feel inferior. Then you end up not really ministering to them on a level that they can relate to.

Once a year we have a Pastors' Planning Meetings for our annual Pastors' Conference. I get together with Raul Ries, Mike MacIntosh, Greg Laurie, Skip Heitzig, and several others. At the session we had after Raul and Mike got their doctoral degrees, everyone was sort of joshing them about their titles. 'Dr. Raul Ries' and 'Dr. Mike MacIntosh.' We were giving them a bad time, and one of the fellows remarked, "Well, if you guys can just go to school and get enough education, you can probably reduce your churches to manageable sizes."

I thought that was classic. Because having begun in the Spirit, if you're going to try to be made perfect in the flesh, you're only going to hinder what God has done and wants to do. The only way is to continue in the Spirit. Having begun in the Spirit, let us continue in the Spirit! Thank God that Raul is still Raul, and Mike is still Mike, men who know their own limitations and inabilities, men who still rely wholly on the Spirit.

The Lord said to Jeremiah, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me," (Jeremiah 9:23-24). That's the only thing that's worthwhile, that you understand and know God. "I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD." (Jeremiah 9:24).

That's why God chooses such totally unqualified people like us, fills us with His Spirit, and then does a mighty work through us that astounds and baffles the world. Now, how can we be so foolish as to try to

find some reason in us to explain why God used us so that we might glory in ourselves rather than glorying in the Lord and in what He has done?

Paul writing to the Corinthians said, "For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (I Corinthians 4:7). So what do you have more than anybody else? Whatever you have, you've received it as a gift from God. If you have received it, then why do you glory as though you didn't, as though you are something special?

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