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Courageous Leadership

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The Stakes of Leadership

TEN DAYS AFTER THE ATTACKS ON THE WORLD TRADE CENTER Towers, I stood in the rubble at Ground Zero, overwhelmed by the aftermath of one of the most horrific events in history.

On that world-changing morning of September 11, 2001, Manhattan, New York, became a war zone. The terrorists took no prisoners, held no hostages. Death was the only option they offered, so three thousand ordinary people died that day, most without an opportunity for a final embrace or even a last good-bye.

The New York City officials who invited me to tour Ground Zero led me past the check points and into “The Pit,” the area immediately surrounding the fallen towers. In the grim shadows of the huge cranes that slowly shifted scraps of twisted metal, rescue workers dug through the rubble, and bucket brigades passed pails of debris from hand to hand. The workers moved silently, listening, I knew, for the sounds—any sounds—of survivors.

Those ninety minutes will stay with me for the rest of my life.

Words cannot convey, nor television screens capture, the enormity of the devastation I saw for that hour and a half. For the first thirty minutes the only two words I could utter were, “No way!” And I said them over and over again.

In my imagination I had envisioned the two slender towers sinking into a pile of debris that would fit easily within the confines

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of a large football stadium. My mental picture was big—and tragic—enough, but reality was a hundred times more tragic. A square mile of ruin. Numerous city blocks obliterated. One of the *smaller* buildings that came down was over forty stories high. Several larger buildings, still standing when I was there, were buckling and would have to be demolished. Some looked like the Oklahoma Federal Building with its front blown off. Others, blocks away, had windows shattered. The sheer enormity of what happened that day took my breath away.

I said “No way!” again when I saw the dedication of the rescue workers, many of whom were still digging after ten days, with bloodied hands and blistered feet, because their firefighting buddies were buried under the piles of twisted steel. How can I describe what it was like to be with them, to look into their eyes and see the profound coupling of utter exhaustion and unyielding determination? There were hundreds and hundreds of them. I found myself torn between wanting to grab hold of them and say, “Please stop. You’ve got to rest. You’ve got to go home,” and at the same time wanting to pat them on the back and say, “Don’t give up! If I were under that pile of destruction I’d want someone like you digging for me.”

I’ve never been in war, so I’ve never seen men and women like that. I’ve never seen people who were nearly dead on their feet walk back into the carnage because they couldn’t do otherwise. I’ll never forget it. People like that ennoble the human spirit. They remind us that we can still be heroic.

Later in the day, I was driven by cab to a designated place several blocks away from the rescue effort, where family and friends were posting pictures of loved ones on a crudely constructed bulletin board that ran for hundreds of feet along the sidewalk. As I looked at the photographs crammed from top to bottom, side to side, again I said, “No way!” No way should men, women, and children have to live with this kind of loss and grief.

Back and forth walked the people left behind. For twenty-four hours every day they wandered like zombies along the city streets, hoping against hope that *someone* could tell them *something* about their father, their daughter, their friend. There was no way they could move on with their lives. They couldn't eat or sleep. They couldn't go home without *some* information, *some* piece of news, *some* degree of closure.

I could understand their tenacity. What else could they do? If my family—Lynne or Shauna or Todd—or my friends were among those missing beneath the rubble, I would do the same. I'd plaster their pictures all over that wall; I'd grab people by the collar if I thought they could offer me one little shred of information or hope.

As I hailed a cab to take me back to my hotel, I felt like screaming my next "No way!" in an attempt to block out the bitterest truth of all, that all this suffering, this holocaust, was caused not by a natural calamity or even some freak accident, but by the deliberate schemes of fellow human beings. No earthquake, no shift in geological plates caused this wreckage. No flood, tornado, or hurricane did this. The death and destruction surrounding me were the direct result of the careful plans of people so caught up in radical political beliefs and so filled with hatred that as they watched the television coverage of Ground Zero they high-fived each other and jumped for joy.

"No way!" I cried again. *There's no way evil can run this deep.* But it did. No matter how incomprehensible was the scene surrounding me, the enormity of evil behind it could not be denied.

But strangely, while the ashes smoldered around me and grief overwhelmed me, even then, a profound hope rose in my heart. Slicing through the anguished "no ways" reverberating in my mind were the words I had repeated ten thousand times before, but now they cut with the flash of urgency. *The local church is the hope of the world. The local church is the hope of the world.* I could see it so clearly.

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I do not intend to minimize the contribution of the many fine organizations performing wonderful, loving, charitable acts in the middle of the misery of Ground Zero. The Red Cross was handing out work gloves and breathing masks, fresh socks and clean boots. Restaurants were setting up barbecue grills on sidewalks and cooking free food for rescue workers. Soft drink manufacturers donated beverages. Humanitarian groups and corporations set up trust funds with hundreds of millions of dollars for the families of victims. Money poured in. For all these actions Americans should be proud. And I certainly am.

But work of a deeper kind was happening behind the scenes in downtown Manhattan during those days. While many pastors and church volunteers joined with charitable agencies in helping to meet physical and material needs, they also went beyond that—far beyond it. Ordinary Christ-followers like you and me sat in restaurants, office buildings, and temporary shelters, addressing with courage and sensitivity the deep concerns of the *soul*. Meeting one-on-one and in small groups, they cried with people. They prayed with people. They listened. They embraced. They soothed.

It happened twenty-four hours a day for days on end. It was the untold media story, the clip that never made it to the network news. While many fine organizations met the external needs of people, the church was there to do what it is uniquely equipped to do: to offer healing to deeply wounded souls.

That experience had and still has a powerful impact on me. It underscored, yet again, the convictions that have been growing in me for the past thirty years—that the church has an utterly unique mission to fulfill on planet Earth, and that the future of our society depends, largely, on whether or not church leaders understand that mission and mobilize their congregations accordingly. Hopefully, the events of September 11, 2001, will never be repeated. But there will be other tragedies, other acts of violence, other losses that grieve our hearts and break the heart of God.

Will the Church of Jesus Christ be a light bright enough to shine in such darkness?

But wait. I'm running ahead of myself. Let me rewind the videotape and start at the beginning of my experience with the church.

THE BEAUTY OF THE CHURCH

IN THE EARLY SEVENTIES I had an experience so powerful that it divided my life into before and after. I was a college student taking a required course in New Testament Studies to complete my major. To my way of thinking this class was guaranteed to be brain-numbingly boring. A required Bible class? It had “flat liner” written all over it. I was sure that the only challenge this class would offer me would be the challenge of trying to stay awake.

As I staked out my usual claim to a back row seat and assumed a comfortable slouch—legs extended, arms folded—I had no idea that a spiritual ambush awaited me. Toward the end of the lecture, just when I thought it was time to pack it up and leave, the professor, Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian, decided he wasn't quite finished for the day. Closing his notes, he stepped out from behind the lectern. Then he bared his soul to a room full of unsuspecting twenty-year-olds.

“Students,” he said, “there was once a community of believers who were so totally devoted to God that their life together was charged with the Spirit's power.

“In that band of Christ-followers, believers loved each other with a radical kind of love. They took off their masks and shared their lives with one another. They laughed and cried and prayed and sang and served together in authentic Christian fellowship.

“Those who had more shared freely with those who had less until socioeconomic barriers melted away. People related together in ways that bridged gender and racial chasms, and celebrated cultural differences.

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“Acts 2 tells us that this community of believers, this church, offered unbelievers a vision of life that was so beautiful it took their breath away. It was so bold, so creative, so dynamic that they couldn’t resist it. Verse 47 tells us that ‘the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.’ ”

Dr. Bilezikian’s unscripted words were as much a lament as they were a dream, a sad longing for the restoration of the first century church. I had never imagined a more compelling vision. In fact, that day I didn’t just see the vision; I was seized by it.

Suddenly, there were tears in my eyes and a responsive chord rising up in my soul.

Where, I wondered, had that beauty gone?

Why was that power not evident in the contemporary church?

Would the Christian community ever see that potential realized again?

Since that day, I have been held hostage to the powerful picture of the Acts 2 dream painted in that college classroom. In the weeks and months after that first lecture, I was haunted by questions. *What if a true community of God could be established in the twentieth century? What if what happened in Jerusalem could happen in Chicago?* Such a movement of God would transform this world and usher people into the next.

I was a goner, utterly captured by a single vision of the potential beauty of the local church. In 1975 that vision led me and a handful of colleagues to start Willow Creek Community Church. Now, almost thirty years later, that vision still rivets my attention, sparks my passion, and calls forth the best effort I can give.

THE POWER OF THE CHURCH

ONE MAJOR FACET OF the beauty of the local church is its power to transform the human heart. I remember exactly where I was when I saw clearly the world’s need for this transforming power. You could say I was “provoked” to this understanding.