

A TIME FOR EVERYTHING

Dr. George O. Wood

Ecclesiastes 3:1 “There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven.” It lists a whole lot of things like a time to be born, a time to die. I’ll add a verse: there is a time to come and a time to leave.

Our time to come was 17 years ago and it seems like but a day. There’s been a lot of work. But if I were to characterize the last 17 years I would not characterize it by the word “work.” I would characterize it by words like joy, privilege, delight.

Now the body of Christ, that division of it known as the Southern California Assemblies of God, has asked me to accept a new assignment. I do that with a sense of God’s leading. At the same time knowing that it brings a time of transition and a time of personal trauma. This is the only church I’ve ever pastored. The only church I’ve ever wanted to pastor. In all likelihood the only church I will ever pastor. I’m a one-love kind of person, I guess. I don’t really know how to say good bye. Just like I really haven’t known for 17 years how to pastor. But I’ve tried.

There are so many ways Jewel and I and our family want to thank you. So many ways that you have ministered to us that you could never know. Yet I’m comforted by the fact that we’ll have some Sundays yet ahead of us where we can focus more on thanksgiving. I really felt that the focus of my message today should be upon what’s ahead.

If I could thank you for anything, the thing I’m most grateful to this church for is that you’ve let us be human beings. You’ve not put us in some spiritual straight jacket. Expected things of us we couldn’t deliver. You let us be free to make our mistakes. One of the key mistakes I’ve made that I think many ministers make is in the pursuit of the work of the ministry. I have at times neglected Jewel and the responsibilities to the children. She has so graciously picked up on those responsibilities. She has carried a good deal of the load of this church in an unseen way.

I especially thank you in allowing us to be human beings in allowing that of our children as well. When we came here Evangeline was three years of age. And George Paul was one. I remember with great apprehension the prospect of bringing children up in the fishbowl of the pastor’s home. I was aware of enough horror stories of pastor’s kids. I didn’t want that of my own kids. What would it profit a man if he gain the whole world or pastor a growing church if he loses his own family. Didn’t want that to happen. Their growth and maturity and where they are today in life did not happen just because of Jewel and me. It happened because of you. You helped us. you didn’t put some unnatural expectations on our children. You let them be kids. You let them be teenagers. You loved them. You prayed for them. You encouraged them. But never did you make them wear some kind of plastic role. In doing so you’ve given to our family an immeasurable gift. We are the better for it and I want to thank you.

Because I know that you love us, I am going to have the boldness to ask some things of you. I’m going to trade on that love today. Since I always have several points to a message, I cannot give a message without having some points. I have three points today. Three things that I would like before God to ask you for.

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First, I'm going to ask you to release us. There's biblical prescience for that as difficult as that is. The Lord has asked me to release you into the pastoral care of someone else. I remember years ago having a dream, I think it was the most frightening dream I ever had. I dreamed that I wasn't the pastor of the church and whoever came in as my successor was absolutely torn up. They seemed to have as their model for leadership more of a dash of Hitler more than the presence of Christ. You're too valuable of friends for me to want to do anything in anyway to bring harm into your life. I've had to release this church and the call that God put upon me and release you to God's care. Now I'm asking you to release me.

There's biblical precedent for this. The church that I've always loved and has quite frankly been my model for this church has been the Antioch church described in Acts 11. It was the first multi racial, multi language, multi ethic, multi diversity church of the Bible. For the first time Jews and Greeks set down and ate together and prayed together and fellowshiped together. That has always been my ideal for this church. That what called us together was not that we were all cut out of the same cookie cutter. We all have unique diversities. We're different ages in life. We are man or woman, single or married or divorced or widowed. We are young or old, Republican or Democrat, white or black or whatever the particular nature this cosmopolitan community is. We are educated or we do not have a formal education. We work in a factory or we work in an office or we're a student or we teach. There is a rich diversity within this body. Rich diversity even in terms of church backgrounds and no church backgrounds from which we come. We have never sought to build a church that was anything other than expansive in its vision and love as that of Christ itself. We have never sought to exclude anyone whom Christ has included. Therefore we've even said if you are a born again believer and you believe the Bible is God's word and Jesus is God's Son and our Lord and only Savior if you disagree with us on some other matters doctrinally, that's ok. If we're going to live together in heaven we might as well get used to it here on earth. This church can tolerate even doctrinal diversity. We have said love will overrule those areas of differences.

I've seen all that in the Antiochan church. Now we have a chance as a church to follow Antioch in another way. Antioch released its senior leaders to a missionary call. At one point Paul and Barnabus, hands were laid upon them and they were sent out to extend the mission of Christ in the world. I'm going to ask you to do that for us. Because I took this new assignment with a very definite sense that it was a missionary assignment. I would not have taken it otherwise. I've never been interested in pastor another church so it wasn't that. It wasn't the itch to transfer that drove me. I would not be so foolish as to compare myself to Paul and Barnabus. But evidently the Holy Spirit has put upon me a missionary call.

The Assemblies of God of Southern California has responsibilities geographically for the territory of Fresno down to the Mexican border. We have 420 churches in that area of humanity populated by millions of people. There's about a 100,000 believers in those churches and 1600 ministers. Along with our new superintendent and our secretary-treasurer the three of us will have the opportunity together to attempt to advance the cause of Christ in this region of the world. It's really home missions. Typically the assistant superintendent has had the portfolio for home missions and foreign missions which means under the assistant superintendent's role has been the immediate supervision of approximately 150 dependent churches who are smaller who needs lots of strong help in pastor procurement, motivation, training, leadership and guidance.

Ten percent of the Assemblies of God foreign missionaries from the United States that are serving the Lord in 120 some countries of the world, ten percent of those missionaries come out

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of this district. About 150 plus missionaries. The assistant superintendent has had a responsibility also in the beginning of the selection process, encouragement, motivation.

In addition our district has adopted the goal of planting 200 new churches in Southern California in the 1990s which we are calling the Decade of Harvest. That's an enormous assignment to participate in. I believe with God's help we can do it. In the past 17 years we have seen this church multiply 15 times over. Growth rate in 17 years of 1500 percent. I can't think of anything I'd rather do than seek to bring 200 Newport Mesa Christian Centers into existence all over the Southern California region from Fresno to the Mexican border. I can't think of anything that would more greatly advance the kingdom of God than giving myself to such a venture. I'm going to ask you to release me to help do that. And I know you will.

Second thing I'd like to ask you to do is to recommit to this church. As God is my witness and as you are my witnesses I have never sought to build a George Wood church. Through the years I have consciously sought to avoid the use of the personal pronoun "my" in referring to the church, the staff, or you. This is not *my* church. The staff is not *my* staff. You are not *my* people. I love you but this is the Lord's church. It is the Lord's staff and you are the Lord's people. I have no proprietorship. I have no ownership. I've only been a trustee in the kingdom of God. A steward, a servant. But his is the glory and the honor.

When we built these buildings purposely the leadership, the board and I, decided to leave off any cornerstone because we did not want a single one of our names engraved in any rock. We do not want people to come in and look at a stone and say those were the glory days when George Wood was pastor of this church. Bah- humbug! If that's what people say then we really haven't built upon rock, have we? We've built on the sand of personality and if we have learned anything about the scandals in the body of Christ over the last year it is that no ministry should ever be built on a human personality. We've got to be committed to things deeper than personalities.

Christ said he would build the church. What is after all George Wood? Only servants through whom you came to believe as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, others now will water it. But God will make it to grow.

The vision that we had right from the beginning of seeing a church grow strong enough that we could in large bites send 300-500 people out to found new churches in South Orange County. That day is still coming. That's God's dream. That's not just our dream. That I believe is God's dream for this church. It's like God is working on a canvas and he's painting that picture. I've thought he was going to use me to paint the whole picture but it turned out in his sovereign will he wanted at this time to change the paint brushes. But he hasn't stopped painting. It's important that we realize that.

This community needs the gospel, more now than ever. It needs a strong church like this church. It needs loving people. I wish everybody in this whole community could find the kind of friendship and support in prayer and care that I know is in this body. We have a large job to do.

I don't want you to look upon this coming time of transition with any kind of fear and trepidation. I'd like to encourage you in your recommitment to the church to look upon this time with a great anticipation of that God is yet going to do.

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I thought of a way to maybe put that across to you. Suppose I said that in the last two days as the board of elders was out in the desert praying and retreating and talking that we had had revealed to us who the next pastor of the church was going to be. We called that person and they said, "Yes, God's been talking to me as well." And I were then able today to announce this morning that coming to candidate at the church next Sunday and if you'll vote yes willing to accept is the next pastor of Newport Mesa Christian Center Billy Graham. We'd all get excited about that. Somehow that would put my resignation in context. I'd be thrilled with that.

I don't think we should have any less expectation or whoever God will choose. Because for this church he will be God's Billy Graham. That person will extend the mission that this church has identified with.

I've been preaching from 1 Samuel about a person after God's own heart. God has a person after his own heart. I wouldn't be surprised if the Lord's already started to tug at that person's heart before there's any approach. Just like he tugged at mine years ago. The best days are ahead because God is committed to finishing what he started. God is not in the habit of beginning bridges and then leaving the span incomplete. He's not in the habit of starting buildings and then leaving them as ruins. He said I will complete the work which I have begun.

I realize, I'm practical enough and common-sensical enough to realize that some of you have had experiences where time of transition in pastoral leadership has not been a good experience. I want to appeal to you at this time as we go through this to approach this time not with fear but with faith. I believe there are some things that God will call us to that will help protect us.

If I had a motto it would be to adopt John Wesley's motto which is on his tombstone. He lies buried at Westminster Abby in London, England. John Wesley traveled a quarter of a million miles on horseback preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Hundreds of thousands of people were brought to Christ through his ministry. He wrote scores of books. Yet on his tombstone are engraved these words "God buries his workmen but not his work."

The work is everything. The church survived the loss of the apostles and it went on. Isn't that amazing? It survived the loss of Luther and Wesley and Livingston and God knows who else. And it's going to survive little bitty old me. And not just survive but advance. I encourage you, I ask you, I urge you – commit to the church. Don't flake out and follow a personality somewhere.

There was a new insight I got in the scripture this week. It's marvelous how experience helps us understand the Bible. I was quickened to look at John 21 where Jesus has this famous dialogue with Peter. He saying "Do you love me?" I've preached on that text. I don't think I've ever understood it as well as I understand it today. But I've preached a lot of messages I haven't understood. Jesus is leaving. Jesus was the greatest preacher there ever was. Greatest pastor there ever was. Greatest human being there ever was. I'm sure that the disciples had the feeling like "Jesus! You're leaving! Who's going to be our teacher now? You gave us the Sermon on the Mount. That was great stuff, Lord, and we're waiting for more. You mean you're not going to give us any more sermons?"

You know what the Lord said to Peter. He said, first, do you love me. Because the prerequisite of all ministry is love for the Lord. If you don't have love for the Lord the ministry will be worthless. You want to have love for people. But the Lord after he assured himself that Peter

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loved him said to him, Feed my sheep. Which being translated is Peter, the time to listen to my sermons is now over. It's time to preach some yourself.

I want to exhort this congregation which has been a marvelous congregation to hear God's word to see as a prospect for you that you now having heard God's word and hopefully having grown in God's word can yourself commit it to other people as well.

The Lord has sheep in this community that need to be fed. Boys and girls, young people, old people, people of all stripes. You're a vital part of God's plan for this community. I ask you to recommit to this body.

My third request is to ask you to pray. I know you'd expect me to say that. But I don't say it just because it's expected. I say it because it's absolutely vital. We cannot take prayer for granted.

We need to saturate this time of transition with prayer. It was prayer that linked me to this body of Christ. It was October of 1970 when I as campus pastor of Evangel College was in an evening meeting and I looked out across the sea of faces in that college chapel filled with a thousand young college students and felt God inwardly say to me, "George, look around you. This isn't going to be your place of ministry much any longer." I said nothing to anyone but kept that word quietly tucked away. Months later when I had come to the church and accepted the pastorate I was to find that it was that same week, the last week of October 1970 that the church went out in quest for a new pastor. And before they did anything they summoned the church in a small body between 60 and 80 people to a week of fasting and prayer. That before they did anything they could get to God. And hear from him.

I do not want this church to approach this time with any sense of haughtiness. The sense that we've arrived or that Newport Mesa is a great church. You're a wonderful people. But only Christ is great. So I'm going to ask you to pray and to pray much. There's two things that I'm going to particularly ask you to do in regard to prayer.

I'm going to ask you to come back this evening at 6:00 as we have an opportunity for more extensive corporate prayer. Prayer for the staff and the board. We're going to have members of the board share some things that are on their heart. This is a critically important time. I'd like for us to commence this time with a corporate prayer meeting that is attended by everybody in the body. I'd like to see us have folding chairs, standing room only this evening. We don't have that normally on Sunday nights. You know that I have never sought to make you feel guilty about coming on Sunday nights. If you haven't chosen to come to feel like you were less a Christian if you stayed away. We have tried to do our best on Sunday night to proclaim God's word, to make it a ministry, but I have determined years ago I would not be party to a church that was built on guilt. So we've not tried to motivate people by guilt or the like. But if I have to use guilt I'll do it tonight!

I want you here. There's something happens when the body of Christ gets together for prayer, I want you to be in prayer this afternoon. Maybe some of you will have a word from the Lord. A prophetic word or something that will really be from God for us at this time. I ask the body to be here this one Sunday night above all Sunday nights. To launch this time with prayer.

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Then the second thing I want you to do is to be part of a prayer chain. Right away when this happened on Tuesday this is really the first thing that the Lord dropped in my heart. Call the congregation to unceasing prayer. That's what we're going to do. Until the new pastor's chosen we're going to ask the congregation to participate in a 24 hour, 7 day a week prayer chain. Fifteen minute increments. There's 24 hours in a day, there's about 700 fifteen minute increments in a week. We would like every person in the congregation to take one only of those approximate 700 spots. I know you're going to be praying more than that. But we want to create a continuous climate of prayer and intercession where we call you to prayer for the church, for the board of elders, for the staff, for the ministry of the church, for the community, for me.

And while you're praying I'd love for you to keep notes of what God is putting in your heart. When the pastoral church process is completed to gather copies of all those notes and bind them in a book as to what dropped in your heart for this church. I believe if we will pray this time with intensity, this 24 hours a day until the Lord has confirmed this person to us we may not only get a new pastor, we may have a full scale revival on our hands.

I know for some of you it'll be hard. Like we've already had 2 services sign up. So that's what you get for coming late. You don't get the priority times. We've got a lot of afternoon spots available. And I think we have some middle of the night spots available. And other times. It may call you to a special sacrifice like setting the alarm clock for a specific time. To get up and pray those 15 minutes for just that one spot a week. It'd be nice to keep that prayer chain going until Jesus comes but you don't ask people for unending commitments. You do it 7 weeks or 10 weeks or whatever. That's how you best get commitments. So we'll let the church later decide how they want to continue this atmosphere of prayer. But it's critical right now. I believe if we do that, God will help us through this time.

I don't know how to close this for sure. This story more than any other I think expresses what we wanted this church to be. Years ago when we began talking about the kind of church wanted to build here I had written an article, even preached a sermon about the fact that what we wanted to see was a great diversity within the body of Christ. Anybody was welcome. Catholics, Baptists, Assemblies of God, people with no church background. Whoever. You're welcome. At the foot of the cross, we're one in Christ. I guess I had preached rather anointed. My son who was then about 7 or 8 and his favorite spot – the church was then on 22nd street – was the balcony. Anybody who sat in the balcony had the best seat. He used to take notes on all my sermons. He came up excitedly saying, "Dad I got it! I got it! What this church is supposed to be. We'll call the balcony the KG balcony." I said, "Really? What does K and G stand for?" He hadn't got his spelling down too well yet. He was spelling phonetically. He said, "Dad! The KG balcony is for the katholics and the gews so they'll have the best seat in the house."

You got it! The body of Christ is a wonderfully broad place. Whom Christ receives let not the church reject. Let not the circle we draw in membership be smaller than the circle Christ draws and let it not be larger than the circle Christ draws. Let us not allow those whom Christ would not allow and forbid those whom Christ would not forbid. But let us demonstrate what the Lord called us to do. "By this will all men know that you are my disciples if you love one another."

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Our close we're going to ask you to respond to sign up for a prayer time. But before that happens, Ken, who is chairman *pro tem* of the board has some words to share with us from the board of elders.

Ken: Thank you, George. Stand here. This is your spot. And Wayne come up and stand with me, will you? For some of you that maybe didn't hear this news until this morning or just recently, there are others of us who have had a head start on it. We've had a week. We've had a great weekend, the board and certain members of the staff met together this weekend for two days and really began to do some things, to get some processes started. We've had an opportunity to shed a lot of tears. We've cried together. We've prayed together. And we've laughed a lot together too. And we're going to do more of that in the next few weeks. And we've begun to plan together. The board went through the by-laws, went through the task that's before us, the great opportunity that lies ahead.

The first thing we did George has already announced. We voted unanimously and with no reservations, with great joy to elect Wayne as our interim pastor. Wayne's pastored this church with George for 15 years. He knows the staff, works well with the staff. And he's a great leader in his own right and we're very privileged and honored to have he and Diane in that role.

The second step that we took I think is equally as important. That is to assess the church. To look at what we are as a body, what are our great resources. You and the people in the first 2 services, all of us together, represent God's greatest resource in this church. In that group are those who are called out among us to minister in the form of our staff. We have a very diverse, very skilled, very godly staff. We saw that as one of our greatest resources. It's the staff that God's allowed us to build through the leadership of George and Wayne together to gather a group of people who serve us so well. So again, the board without reservation re-appointed every one of those members of our staff to those present positions, to go on in service to the church. We seek their commitment to the days that lie ahead and the months and years that lie ahead.

The third thing we did was begin to look at the process of how a new pastor would be selected, a new shepherd to guide this flock. The by laws give us a great deal of direction. I was reminded that in the process of doing that I'm presently in the middle of reading Chuck Colson's new book Kingdoms in Conflict. Literally the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world as they inter-relate one with the other and it's kind of interesting that here in this country we're in the process of seeking new leadership. What a raucous affair that is. They're looking at new leadership in Panama and Afghanistan and Lebanon. The way the kingdom of this world selects leadership and has a transition of power is so very different than what we experience this weekend. The comradeship of brothers and people united in Christ for one purpose. We cried, we laughed, we prayed and we planned and power was transferred.

There is probably no great time for us to give up George to release him. But if ever there was a good time we on the board and I think you would share the thought that this is probably a good time. Because I can think of no time in the years that I've been in the church and I've been through three transitions of leadership in this church in all 17 years, and 15 years of these men's pilgrimage here. I can think of no time in the history of this church when the resources, the power, the things that God has provided for us have been greater, when we're in a better position to pull together, to be committed, to stick together one with the other and to carry out the will that God has called each of us to. We have great resources and great blessing from the Lord.

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The actual process, the mechanical parts of calling a new pastor we are already exploring. We're in the process. The board will meet several times this week. One of the things we've immediately set aside for ourselves as a commitment is confidentiality. Many of you don't know until maybe you've heard this morning, George has been asked by a number of churches in the years that he's been here to leave and go and pastor other churches. That never caused a problem for us because we weren't part of that process. George knew the will of God in his life at that time and elected to stay. This body was not disrupted. He had the opportunity to be considered and to pass. We need to extend that same privilege to others for we may be looking for a pastor whose not looking for us, knowingly at this point. Maybe someone who God hasn't fully revealed the direction he has for that person's life. So part of the process will be confidentiality.

In order to maintain that, Wayne by Monday will have some envelopes and some letterhead addressed to the pulpit committee with the church address on it. It'll be in the back of the church, in the church office. If you have letterhead you're free to use your own as well. If you want to communicate with the pulpit committee, if you would simply in one of those envelopes or your own write it, addressed to the church, attention pulpit committee and mark the envelope "confidential." Those communications will be opened only in the closed meetings of the pulpit committee. In that way we can preserve the confidentiality of names that you might submit or thoughts that the Lord is giving to you in your time of prayer. And that will be very much appreciated and help that flow of information.

When the pulpit committee in the providence of God has found a person that they feel is right to present to the congregation those people will be presented to you one at a time until the church finds that person that we wish to have as the shepherd as we go forward.

In the interim the first step when we are all together tonight is to really commit to be here tonight as George has indicated. In addition to starting the process of prayer together corporately we want to rededicate the staff and have all of you share in that process of rededication and getting ready to go to the future. We look forward to this as an exciting time. I cheated fait for a long time, almost 17 years on the pulpit committee and never had to do a lick of work. I look forward to the privilege of being able to serve in that capacity now. We thank you.

George Wood: What we're going to ask you to do now is to be ready to come and commit yourself in prayer. I'm going to ask first that those who have the clip boards and the signs take your positions. Then I'm going to pray. We're going to try to fan out so you can have access easily to people. Midnight tonight is when the prayer chain starts. When you see a sign that says like A.M. that means from midnight till twelve noon. Then P.M. from twelve noon through the afternoon and evening until midnight. So determine whether you want A.M. or P.M. We're asking you to sign a fresh spot because we'd like the whole 24 hours covered. That may require some adjustment to your schedule. Maybe you'll use break time at work or you can even set at your desk and do your work and turn your mind to prayer if necessary to make sure we can have each one of these spots covered.

I know the tendency is going to be to rush out of here after you've done this. What I'd like to do is do what we always do in the altar call is continue to sing. I invite you to join me in singing, stand in line and sing, go back to your seat after you've signed up and wait until the benediction. Then we'll conclude the service with the benediction. But I'd like to ask you now to stand. And

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I'd like you to come. Bring with you, by the way, a piece of paper so you can write down the time that you sign up for. So you can remember what you signed up for. If you do forget and don't have it written down, you can always call the church office. But it would be easier for you if you would immediately write down what you signed up for. We hope in this service to get most all these sheets filled. It'd be wonderful to get all 14 sheets filled in this service.

Here I am wholly available. As for me I will serve the Lord. I've asked you to release us. I've asked you to commit to this church. And I'm asking you to pray. Will you do that. I ask you to, in Christ's name. Here I am wholly available. Please come.