

HOW TO STEP OUT IN FAITH

Dr. George O. Wood

I want to share some things with you about stepping out in faith. Just simple concepts. Simple things from God's word.

There are these things I want to say about faith.

The first thing is this: faith has a floor.

Why do I say that? Because so many people think that faith is doing something absurd. That it's taking a leap in the dark. That it's breaking off into thin ice somewhere. I want to tell you that I could not really become a Christian until I had a safe place to stand intellectually. I am the kind of person who questions. I'm always asking questions. I was the sort of young person growing up in the church who heard all the sermons there were to hear, and good sermons at that, and saw the Christian life modeled in my own home. But when it came down to it, I needed to know an answer for myself. Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Is it all an emotional myth? Or is there some intellectual reality to it. I had to find a floor for my faith.

I've been the same way about the baptism in the Spirit. And all things relating to the Spirit I've always had to say, is there biblical ground for what I'm experiencing. I have to believe that the Spirit will not go where the word of God does not permit. And that the word of God will always either precede or follow our experience. Many times we already have the floor for an experience by the clear teaching of the word of God. Other times we may have an experience and not really understand what is going on because we don't have a sufficient grasp of God's word. But if the experience is valid, God's word will underwrite it in every situation.

Paul says to the Romans "Faith comes by hearing the word."

Many of you last Sunday evening began a new venture of walking in the Spirit through the experience we call the baptism in the Spirit. It is a gateway experience and I had intended to take some time with this tonight about speaking in regard to the five moments bringing faith. The five moments in the book of Acts where people receive the baptism in the spirit. The day of Pentecost, Acts 1. Samaria, Acts 8. Paul, Acts 9. Cornelius, Acts 10-11. And Ephesus, Acts 19.

Basically what I could do in doing those five sections, teaching from those five sections is lay down an intellectual floor for an experience in the baptism in the Spirit. I think rather than carrying you through the detail of all that thought, what I would simply like to say as sort of a floor for it is that God made a promise in the word of Jesus. And I have to believe that when Jesus makes a promise he's going to keep it. He told the disciples before his ascension, "Wait in Jerusalem until you receive the promise of the Father from on high." They waited and they experienced that promise. When that day of realization was completed Peter turns around and stands up before the assembled people who had come to Christ that day and said to them, "The promise is for you and it is for all who are far off."

I have to believe that that includes me and that includes you. The Spirit of God is at work in our lives in the same way that he has been at work in the book of Acts. No exception.

HOW TO STEP OUT IN FAITH

I have found in other areas in stepping out in faith that the written word of God becomes a floor and there are moments too when you're walking with the Lord in prayer when God reveals to you something in your heart and you know that it is a reality even though you have not yet seen the evidence of it. The Christian life that expands and grows is one that activates faith and that learns that when God has revealed something in your heart go ahead and trust it and step out and see if there indeed is a floor there.

Sometimes in our matters of faith, God will give us vital personal assurance that we go ahead even though the circumstances and the environment seems to be the opposite.

I remember about two years ago now I had felt that it was really the will of the Lord and the leadership of the church that we begin our venture of relocating the congregation to Fair and Newport. We were in the middle of negotiating the lease for the land with southern California College. And the leadership of the church felt that it would be well to share with the entire church this development and to ask the entire church to begin praying and discussing with us what God wanted us to do. I had a keen sense in my heart that this is what he wanted but I am hopefully the kind of pastor that does not impose my will on the congregation. Because I believe God speaks collectively he doesn't just speak to a person in a place of responsibility. He speaks to all of our hearts. So I sought that collectivity of the counsel of the Spirit.

We called three Sunday nights when we would share together what the dream was for the future and we would simply pray together. Some of you here were in those meetings. For those of you who weren't let me rehearse what happened.

The first Sunday night about two-thirds of the auditorium was filled. The second Sunday night about half the auditorium was filled. The third Sunday night as I can recollect about a third of the auditorium was filled. I thought to myself the people in this congregation evidently don't want to pray and talk about these things. Later I have learned to believe that many times God's people would prefer that the leadership feels in its heart a direction and then when it is done with they'll get together and rally. But they themselves for one reason or another don't actually feel like making the decision.

I came away from those three weeks, I must tell you I was discouraged in my spirit. I said we're talking about putting up a complex at the very doorway of the city and less than a hundred people are coming out to talk about it and pray about it. And we're talking about ultimately having a 1500 seat auditorium with a congregation that fills it twice on Sunday morning. It seemed so ludicrous to be talking about building a new facility in the congregation and there were a third of the seats that were full in the present sanctuary. We had ample room there. I've known many a preacher who's gone out of town with tar and feathers by coaxing a congregation into a building program it neither wanted, nor prayed about, nor was ready for. I said, Lord, what is going on here?

The Lord put a deep center of peace in my heart and gave me kind of a personal assurance that this was his will and that in this particular moment faith was at the test. People were really interested. People would prove that to be so. But for right now we were simply to hold steady. Not be bullish. Not try to impose our will upon the people but to simply wait and see the hand of God.

HOW TO STEP OUT IN FAITH

It's amazing to see how God works. I cannot tell you the emotion I felt when on Sunday night October 26 of this last year we had the banquet and had the kind of response we had in the Together We Build campaign. It was such a vindication of what the Spirit of God had originally given me the floor for.

When you begin to develop the sensitivity to the Lord you know when he's speaking to you and you know when he's not. If you're not sure the Holy Spirit is a marvelous teacher. Someone has said you cannot guide a bicycle that's standing still. I believe that with all of my heart. God guides bicycles that are moving.

I want to say to you if you're having struggles in regard to the baptism of the Spirit, if you're having doctrinal struggles, if people have thrown things at you in college or high school or in books or in other churches, or in seminary, I want to be your friend. I have help for you in this relationship without going into all the detail. I think I have as a person considered every objection that has been launched against Pentecostal testimony that's possible to launch. I have considered all the intricacies of the Greek which are continually thrown at Pentecostals.

Acts 19:2 in the King James translation says, "Have you received the Holy Ghost since you believed?" In my early days of growing up in the Pentecostal movement everyone took that as a text for saying you receive the Holy Spirit after you've believed and here's the proof of it. "Have you received the Holy Ghost since you believed?"

But I got to seminary and I found out that the correct translation of that was "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" That of course changes the meaning of it all together. It associates the incorporation of conversion with the baptism in the Spirit.

So with a little spade work that sentence reads literally "Having believed did you receive?" Did both happen at the same time? Did believing and receiving happen at the same time or did they happen at different times. There are those arguing that question from the non-Pentecostal side who say, believing and receiving are one and the same event.

To justify it a person might go to Matthew 27:4, Judas said "I sinned having delivered up guiltless blood." Both happened at the same time. Simultaneous action.

But I found that there are other places in scripture they stand for different times. Like Matthew 22:25 "Having married a wife who died." I would submit that marriage and death are not one and the same act.

Acts 5:10 "Having carried her out they buried her." Separate time sequence.

That's one small illustration. I could share a dozen or two with you that probably wouldn't have broad interest.

Faith has a floor. I personally cannot be a part of anything which asks me to detonate my reasoning power and simply blindly trust. People get into trouble when they blindly trust. When people blindly trust leaders without asking those leaders to give an accountability they're doing wrong. When people stand up in leadership of a group and ask people to follow them from submission and to throw away their reasoning power they're headed on the Jim Jones track. Whether they do it under the guise of the charismatic movement or they do it under some other

HOW TO STEP OUT IN FAITH

manifestation, God has always called us to compared the experience with the word. And an experience is simply the river. And the word of God is simply the channel. And if the experience isn't flowing in the channel of God's word and if it's not being tested by God's word then don't buy the experience. It isn't worth it.

And don't follow a leader who asks for unquestioning and blind loyalty. I've always asked for and I've sought within this congregation that we as a congregation in Christ have the freedom to challenge one another when we are wrong and to do it in the spirit of love. But there ought not to be blind nodding our heads that this is all right when there might be something that's very, very wrong.

Secondly, faith is contagious.

In the gospels we find it is so. When Peter's mother-in-law is healed in Mark 1 Jesus has been in the synagogue that morning. He goes to Peter's house and his mother-in-law is ill with a high fever. Jesus raises her up. The next thing we know the whole town is gathered at sundown at Peter's door. Faith is contagious. When God does something everybody wants in on the act.

There's also a sense that non-faith is contagious in a reverse direction. At Nazareth they did not have faith. And their lack of faith made it impossible for even Jesus to function. We can drown ourselves in a sea of negativity and in a God-can't-do-it-again until it becomes impossible to see God at work. And on the other hand we can we can surround ourselves saying, God is doing it and doing it and doing it.

Steven _____ was sharing this story with me after last Sunday night's service. He was telling me about a Greek orthodox priest he had led to the Lord and seen come to a real experience with the Holy Spirit. As he was learning to walk with the Lord he said he heard an audible voice say to him one time in a prayer meeting "Huntington." He went to Steven and asked, "Do you know a Huntington anywhere?" Steven said there's a Huntington in West Virginia. The priest said, it must not be there. What he had on his mind was pioneering a Greek Orthodox church and somehow Huntington West Virginia does not sound like a place to begin a charismatic Greek orthodox church.

But the impression was left with him so strongly that he began praying about this direction for his life. He happened to be going to a conference that was near Huntington West Virginia so he said, Lord if you want me to go, you supply the funds and then I'll learn to walk out and trust you in this matter. No money came in until the day he was about to leave and he happened to stop by the druggist at the last moment to get some medicine. The druggist kept detaining him, talking to him. Finally he just had to break himself away, I must be going. The druggist said to him, "From time to time I help various churches and pastors in this area and I felt it on my heart in prayer that I should help you with this." And he handed him the money that made it possible for him to go Huntington.

He got to Huntington and somehow he found a few folks that were interested in starting a charismatic Greek Orthodox church. He began meeting with them. On a Sunday night while they were in a meeting together he suddenly said out loud before he had the chance to cut it off, he committed himself before he knew it and said, "God is going to give us a place to meet of our own by Wednesday night." They were meeting in a home.

HOW TO STEP OUT IN FAITH

I'd no more tell you that... I'd no more stand up in front of congregation and say God's going to give us a church by Wednesday night than a man in the moon. I'm more rational than that. Faith has a floor! But he had blurted this out before he even knew what hit him and as soon as it was out he thought, Was that of the Lord? But he felt that it was so he left it.

Monday came and there was no place available. Tuesday came. Then Wednesday he was getting ready to head back to the home Bible study and tell them it was a word falsely spoken. He happened to drop by the hospital to make a call on someone in the hospital and he bumped into the Mother Superior. It was a Catholic hospital. She said "Oh, father, I haven't seen you here before. Who are you?" He shared who he was. She said, I didn't know there was a Greek orthodox church in town. Where are you meeting? He said "We haven't found a church to meet in yet. We're meeting in a home and I'm heading there right now, in fact." She said "Would you like a place to meet? There's this chapel we've built over on the hill that we never use. If your group could use it and you can have the rectory next door. Only make sure the nuns can come up once in a while during the day and pray when they want to."

I don't understand things like that. But I know when God does something special like that it's catching. It elevates your faith. If God does it for him, he's going to do it for me too. I don't understand this mystery but there is a tremendous connection between the sovereignty of God and our faith. God doesn't just have everything blindly, robotly locked in. But somehow our faith activates the power of God. Faith is contagious.

Another thing about faith, thirdly, is faith is developmental.

"To him who has more is given." That's a favorite saying of Jesus. He said it four or five times in the gospels. I used to think he was talking about money. That he was saying the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. But it's actually a sound educational principle. When you have, more is given to you. When you don't have even what you have is taken away.

When I was seventeen years of age I was a freshman at Evangel college. I wanted to be in a gospel group so I could travel on weekends and minister. I had one major drawback – I could not sing. So how am I going to get into a gospel singing group? I'll learn to play the piano. So I signed up for beginning piano. I was a smart freshman. I said to myself it'll be just a matter of several months, maybe three at the most, and I will be playing as well as anybody on campus ... because I have superior skills.

The piano teacher hands me one of the Claire Thompson books for first graders. My freshman intelligence is insulted! Imagine my horror that I found that I could not get what I was reading on the page to coordinate with my fingers and feet. I staggered through that semester. It was a horrendous experience. At the end of the semester I went to the teacher and said, What am I going to get in this class? He said, What do you think you ought to get? I said, I need to make the Dean's list and even though this is a one hour credit course everything hangs on what I get in this course. I need a B in this course. He laughed at me. He said you deserve a D. You're really bad. I said, don't do that. A B- will be just as good. I'll get as much credit as a B. He said, In all honesty I can't give you a B-. I said, If I promise never to take piano again will you give me a B-? He said, I will. He kept his word and I kept mine.

In those few months I was taking beginning piano I did begin to find out a few things. I found out where the keys were on the piano. I could make minimal music. But the only thing I can do

HOW TO STEP OUT IN FAITH

on the piano today is play “Rock of Ages” with two fingers. The only thing I can do on the piano! The little bit I had has been taken away from me. Why? Because of disuse.

On the other hand there are other areas of my life where I have continued working at something and God has given a greater freedom and flexibility. If any of you have studied a foreign language know this. The more you study something that is strange and master it the more you become capable of knowing and being.

Faith is the same way. When you walk with the Lord, faith is developmental. You’re not asked to move mountains at the beginning. You may be asked to simply, move anthills. But begin moving what is before you.

There’s a striking thing about the word “filled” in the book of Acts. The word is often used to describe people who are filled with the Spirit. Sometimes it’s an initial experience with the Spirit at the baptism of the Spirit. And other times such as with Peter when he’s before the Sanhedrin it is noted that he is filled with the Spirit. Why the difference between the two? It’s because in the initial experience of Peter with the baptism in the Spirit he is expansible and the gift is infinite. He’s capable of receiving more and God’s capable of giving more. As he grows and faces new stressful situations in his life he expands to meet those. And there’s more of him that needs more of the Spirit and God gives more of the Spirit to meet him.

That’s why we ought never to simply be satisfied with the question, At what time of your life did you receive the Holy Spirit? That question is never enough. Because the Spirit is somewhat like air. If you leave air in a balloon and just leave it there it eventually will go down if you don’t do anything about it, if you don’t pump any new air into it. Some of the dearest people I know in the world and some of the most cantankerous and meanest and cruelest and gossipy people I know in the world are Pentecostals who had an experience with the Spirit thirty years ago and the air has gone all out of their life. There needs to be a continual new indraft of the Spirit of God in our lives and it’s not sufficient to be filled as to yesterday’s experience but be filled where we are right now, to capacity in the Lord.

Faith is developmental. Exercise the faith you have and God will give you more.

The baptism of the Spirit is not the end. I thought it was the end when I was growing up. You had to have the baptism in the Spirit to hold an office in the youth group. I’ve never liked that kind of thing because of that experience. Because the baptism in the Spirit was the sort of thing you got in order to be accepted in the group. The Spirit of God is not a plaything we get in order to gain social acceptance. The Spirit of God gives us himself in greater measure in order that we might be empowered to serve him more adequately and our inner life might be liberated on the conscious and subconscious level to praise him.

Walk in the gift of the Spirit that you have today and god will give you greater gifts of the Spirit as you walk with him. Faith is developmental.

Another thing about faith. Faith is instinctive.

I was going to say impulsive but that may give a false connotation so I think I’ll use the word instinctive. How do you exercise faith? I’d say it was instinctive.

HOW TO STEP OUT IN FAITH

Let me give a biblical example of this. I like to watch Peter because he's a person in whom you can see faith at work. I think the pinnacle of Peter's experience with faith as it's recorded in the Bible is his raising of Dorcas in Acts 9. Only he and the apostle Paul have an experience that's involved in the raising of a dead person. His special experience comes with Dorcas. It's striking how Peter's faith is developed because he comes to where Dorcas is lying down and he says to her, he calls her name he says to her he says "Tabitha, cumi." Before he has said that he has kicked everybody out of the room that's weeping and wailing. I think where have I been in that picture before? Suddenly it dawns on me in the gospels in the raising of Jairus' daughter Jesus kicks everybody out of the room but Peter, James and John then he bends over the little twelve year old girl and says to her "Taleta cumi." There's only one difference in words in the Aramaic. For the little girl it's Taleta and for the woman it's Tabitha. Same word, different letters because they have different names.

Peter had an experience when he saw the Lord do something. Since faith is contagious he later found himself in a situation that gave him a sense of *deju vu*. Suddenly the gift of faith rushed into his heart and he recreated what the Lord had done. It's a pinnacle of faith to reach out in an instinctive sense and raise somebody up from the dead.

How did Peter develop this? It's because he learned to trust the instinct that was coming to him as he walked with the Lord.

In the second sea storm, the Lord is walking on the water. Peter is the only one in the boat to sense an instinct. He said "Lord, if it's you, bid me to get out of the boat and walk on the water." And the Lord says, Come. Peter followed that moment what was welling up within him.

In Acts 3 when he's going by the temple gate Beautiful, the paralytic had been laying there all his life. Peter is seized with an instinct at that moment and he reaches out and does something quite out of the ordinary. He brings that man to his feet and the man was instantly healed.

Every time Peter has an instinct doesn't mean it's of the Lord? He could do some bad things instinctively. When the Lord said I'm going to the cross. He said No, Lord. Don't ever do that. When the Lord was meeting with Moses and Elijah, Peter instinctive said, Let's build three shelters. And the Lord said, No, that's not a good idea. Peter instinctively reached out to cut off Malcus' ear and that wasn't a good idea either.

But developing a true instinctive of faith becomes a matter of seasoned experience. What I'm going to say about the instinctive development in faith is when you feel something rising up within you that appears to be propelling you to some course of action and it's something out of the ordinary I would urge you if you feel that's from God to give it some wings. And to reach out instinctively and to follow it. If it is not of God it won't take long for you to find that out. You can come back and it'll be one of the greatest training experiences in your life because you'll begin to learn to sense what is of God and what is not of God.

I've found that the baptism in the Spirit is much like this, that reaching out to God and speaking in other tongues is instinctive. It is something which reason tries to dam up within us so that it doesn't flow out. But within our inner recesses God is at work on the subconscious level on the nonverbal level of our life seeking to well up praise in that very important aspect of our nature and being.

HOW TO STEP OUT IN FAITH

I have learned that everything that God does we're somehow involved as well. There are a few exceptions too that but most of the things that God does in us involve our input, our cooperation, our involvement and God takes the small step of faith we have and stretches us. I know a little about stretch because I'm going through a little traction therapy right now. The stretch just does wonders for you. You're pulled and you feel good as you're being pulled.

There are experiences in our life where God simply wants us to be pulled, to be stretched in our being as we begin to respond instinctively and learn to develop a trust for the Spirit of God that is welling up within us, that God then has the freedom to immerse our whole nature in the work of God and the Spirit. So that spiritual experience comes for us more than knowing the doctrines of the church, more than a matter of being good and going to church on Sunday and paying your tithe. Being spiritual involves being bathed in the life of God and being deeply surrounded and melded and molded and shaped into his very nature and character.

I was going to add a fifth point, Faith works. But when I prepared this message I felt the Spirit at that point say, George, you've said enough. I've given you enough for the first four points. If you do point five you'll do it on your own. So I'll stop.

Father, the people in this room hold vast potentiality in your kingdom. There are more than twice as many or more here tonight than were present on the day of Pentecost. Lord, we have shared this evening simply that you have given us the opportunity through the floor you've placed in the scripture to step out into you, to have experience with you. An experience that is both rational and on the other hand emotional and intuitive. An experience that involves verbal processes, thoughts and words. And an experience as well that finds ourselves adrift on the ocean of your grace and love...

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