



January 3, 2008

On a personal note...

This past Christmas was especially meaningful to me as one of my father's sisters and one of her children came to America for the first time. What a joy it was to visit with them and get to know them. The last time I saw them I was eight years old, and so this week was the first time I have ever had substantial conversation with them. Aunt Liz is 67 years old and Iain is 44. Born and raised in Zimbabwe, they both moved to the UK in the last three years.

Though all believers are referred to in Scripture as "trophy of God's grace", when I think of that phrase, I immediately think of Aunt Liz, Aunt Dottie, and dad. Time and space do not permit me to describe the kind of home in which my father was raised. Severe alcoholism, significant physical abuse, the use of weapons, two years in a refugee camp, the ghetto, and poverty all describe the home in which my father was raised. That is all just the tame stuff. If I told you some of the rest, you'd call me a liar. Regardless, when my father and his two siblings reached their 20's, they were hard, bitter, angry people. They had learned to be the ultimate survivors because nobody had ever looked out for them. Even to this day, I'm convinced you could drop my father and his sisters in a foreign city with no food, money, or shelter and they would make it. As my Aunt Liz says, "Once you have faced your worst fear and survived, there is nothing left to fear."

Amazingly, today, none of them are harboring resentment against their parents or bitter about their childhood because of the grace of God. Dad was radically saved at 21. However, Aunt Liz and Aunt Dottie remained far from the Lord for decades. I spent my childhood and well into my adulthood praying for their salvation. In the last five years, both my aunts have prayed to receive Christ. (By the way, my mother had the privilege of leading her mother-in-law to Christ some number of years after mom and dad married.) This very week, Aunt Liz literally stood in my parents' living room and bore testimony to her personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Aunt Liz was a very hard person for the first 60 years of her life. She was a long way from life change through Jesus. Today, she is nothing like the woman everyone knew for six decades. She is truly a new creation. I was moved when I found myself sitting on a couch this week discussing things of the Lord with my aunt. I could hardly sing when she and I stood side by side in a Christmas Eve service and I could hear her singing praises to the Lord. For decades we prayed for her salvation and now she is not only my aunt, but also my sister in Christ.

I want to encourage you to never give up praying for the salvation of your lost family and friends. It matters not how hard they are. It matters not how old they are. They are never beyond the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Pray for them, pray for them, and then pray for them some more. Be real and live out your walk with the Lord in front of them. Jump on every opportunity to share the Gospel with them. It is

never too late. Don't ever give up on them. 2 Peter 3:9: *The Lord is not slow about His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance.*

Reading

I have to say that the books of today are not of the quality of days gone by. Over the December/Christmas/New Year's season, I got on a "classics" kick. I happened across a collection of the classics Nicole had stored away and I picked up *Last of the Mohicans*, (James Fenimore Coopers's 1831 version), and stood there reading a few pages. I got sucked in by the book and somehow over the past month I found time to also read *Billy Budd*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Red Badge of Courage*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *The Taming Of The Shrew* (the book on which the movie, *Ten Things I Hate About You* is loosely based). The word pictures these authors could paint are rarely duplicated today.

With that said, in reading these books I was reminded of what the Lord told us in Ecclesiastes, "there is nothing new under the sun." One of the best ways to gain a pulse on an era's moral compass and values is to read the popular books from that era. If you are widely read, you have already discovered that regardless of what era in the history of humanity that one may study, there truly is nothing new under the sun. Therefore, the issue for us today is not so much how well we can bemoan the moral nosedive of our culture, but rather how you and I will maintain the Lord's standard of morality and the Lord's values in the midst of our culture's offerings. Which leads me to my section on 2008 spiritual commitments.

2008 Spiritual Commitments

Can you believe it is 2008? I spent time on January 1 considering my 2008 spiritual journey. Certainly, there will be things I cannot control in my walk with the Lord because He is the head of our relationship and therefore gets to call the shots. But there are some things I can account for that I thought I would share with you with the hope that it will encourage you to give similar consideration to your 2008 spiritual journey.

Regular Scripture reading – There are a couple of reasons why I don't have a set amount of Scripture I read each day. If I am committed to reading five chapters each day and yet the Holy Spirit wants me to dwell on one section of five verses, my commitment to the five chapters will prevent me from experiencing what the Holy Spirit has for me. Second, if I'm committed to reading five chapters each day of the year and then one day I only do three chapters, I then walk around feeling guilty all day for failing a standard that I came up with and is not biblically mandated. So, here is how I conduct my regular time of personal Scripture reading. I sit down with my Bible and I just start reading and that day I read until I can sense the Holy Spirit moving in me. Now, I know that sounds hokey and those that know me well know that I am far from mystical in my walk with the Lord, but this is just how I do it. Some days I will read two chapters and some days I'll read as much as maybe 15 chapters, but I will sit there and read until I can sense the Holy Spirit working in me. If I feel like He wants me to go back and focus on one small portion that I read, I will do so. An added thrill is that since I have gone to this method of Scripture reading, each year I have ended up reading the Bible from cover to cover without any pressure or rigid reading schedule.

Regular prayer time – I do my prayer time in conjunction with my time of Scripture reading. Once I sense the Holy Spirit working in me, I stop reading and I begin my prayer time. Like my Scripture reading, I have moved away from prayer lists and prayer schedules. Once I sense the Holy Spirit moving in me, I just begin praying as He leads. If I believe I should pray for our church membership, I'll get out

the membership list and pray for families by name. Sometimes it is for specific Bible Study classes at our church and I'll pray for the teacher and the names of the people in that class. I find myself almost always praying for missions in general and in particular for the missionary units for whom the Lord has given me a special burden and bond. I pray often for my family, but there are seasons during which I feel led to pray for them more. It is the same way with my parents, in-laws, staff, and friends. The bottom line is that I have moved away from lists and schedules in my Scripture reading and prayer times. While they are very beneficial to some folks, they are not best for me. The key is to find what works for you and be faithful.

Personal evangelism – my personal evangelism practice is very simple: I share the Gospel as I get the opportunities in my day-to-day living. This is the way it is supposed to be; after all, the Great Commission says, “as you go”. As a result, I now stay away from any commitments that say I'm going to witness to two people a week every week in 2008. When I commit to personal evangelism in 2008, I commit to being faithful to share as the opportunities present themselves. That is not to say I don't ever pre-plan evangelism opportunities. I certainly enjoy participating in our church's Sunday evening outreach. This year, I will commit again to pray faithfully for the salvation of three specific people for whom the Lord has particularly burdened me, and I will do everything I can to win them to the Lord. If I sense the Lord wants me to schedule lunch or breakfast with someone so I can share the Gospel with them, I will do so. But generally speaking, my evangelism strategy is to share as the Lord leads during each day.

I can't talk about personal evangelism without discussing missions. I feel strongly that, pending physical hurdles, every believer should be a participant in mission trips. I pray a regular participation on mission trips would become part of your walk with the Lord. For years now it has been my commitment to go on a mission trip at least once/year, if not more frequently. This commitment began well before I became a pastor. Though the commitment has always meant financial sacrifices in other areas, I have never regretted the commitment. I am especially excited about 2008. The Lord has put us in a situation where Nicole and I can go on mission trips together again. It is a rare blessing for some folks and it has not been feasible for us for several years due to the ages of our kids. But, in 2008, we will not be pregnant (we're done) and all three kids will be old enough to stay with family. So, this year, Nicole and I are going on the Estonia mission trip together. I can't wait. This year I will also do mission trips to North Africa and the Middle East as well as to a yet to be unveiled location in the United States.

Giving – I truly believe that a person's financial giving to Kingdom work is indicative of their love for the Lord. I believe that if someone loves Jesus they will love what Jesus loves and give to His causes. With that said, remember that the Lord measures financial giving in percentages and not bottom line amounts. (For example, a person with \$100 who gives the Lord \$40 gives much more to the Kingdom than a person with \$1,000 who gives \$200 to the Lord.) The Lord honors the percentage given. So, I have made commitments to give financially to Kingdom work in 2008. I'll obviously tithe to my church as that is the minimum standard of giving for a believer. I'll also give over and above that amount to offerings at my church as well as directly to other people or organizations as the Lord leads. I do not have the spiritual gift of giving. I pray each year that the Lord will allow Nicole and me to give more money to the Lord's causes than the year before. Here is one giving principle on which you can hang your hat: the more you give away, the more the Lord will give you which in turn gives you more to give away. It is a beautiful cycle. If you will start it, you can reach dizzying rates of giving. Why don't you give it a try? Giving over and above one's tithe is a tremendous thrill.

Service – Based on Ephesians 4:11-13, I believe every believer is to have at least one place of service in their local church. Though I am employed full time by a church, I commit each year to serve above and beyond the call of duty because I am not serving for the money (trust me ☺); I'm serving because it is the responsibility of the believer. Those that love the Lord serve the Lord. If you do not serve the Lord

through your local church, I'd encourage you to find one place of service at your church and be the most faithful, energetic, and sacrificial servant in that arena of your church. Whether you are in the people ministry (usher, parking lot, guest hosts, info booth), the music ministry, the teaching ministry, the mentoring ministry, the administrative ministry, etc, do what you do for the glory of God. Serve the Lord Jesus faithfully and sacrificially because you love Him.

These are the arenas in which I would encourage you to give consideration with regard to your 2008 spiritual commitments. Read the Word of God regularly, pray regularly, be involved in winning people to Jesus, fund the Kingdom of God as best as you can, and serve the Lord sacrificially. May 2008 be the best year ever in your walk with the Lord.

Missions Fair

I want to strongly encourage you to be at NEHBC on Sunday evening, January 13. In an effort to generate more involvement in missions, we are starting the year with a missions fair at which we will showcase all seven of our 2008 mission trips. There will be booths in the foyer representing each of the trips. There will be a large group gathering in the worship center during which I will provide an overview of each trip. I will discuss the cost of each trip, the nature of the work, the overnight accommodations, the types of food, inoculations, etc. The evening will culminate with me asking you to commit to one of the 2008 trips. I'm not asking you to sign up in blood. I'm asking you to, by faith, pick a trip, make every effort to go, and pray faithfully for provision of time and money. I want to encourage you to come to the missions fair and be challenged in missions.

Regular Schedule Resumes

Let me remind you that our regular Sunday morning schedule resumes this coming Sunday. The holidays are over, and we are back to three services and two Bible Study hours. Wednesday nights resume this coming Wednesday, January 9th at 6:45pm. Don't forget Wednesday nights are family night at NEHBC. K-5th are in Kids on Mission, teens are in SWAT, and the adults are in the full blown worship service. CLU, AWANA, and Round Tables (teens) resume on Sunday evening, January 20.

People Around You Are Hurting

During our recent vacation to Florida, we stayed in a building of condos at Panama City Beach. Each day, there were various activities in which the vacationers could participate. As it was out of season, there were very few folks in the building to participate in the activities. Each morning when we would go to pool, the water aerobics class would be taking place. The class amounted to two couples in the "empty nester" demographic and the instructor. Of course, the water aerobics instructor had a big smile on her face and was constantly offering verbal encouragement to the students and making their experience as positive as possible. As they worked out to the music, she would offer words of encouragement and instruction. She seemed to be one happy person, but as it would turn out, she was a long way from happy. Christmas 2007 was the one-year anniversary of Krista's husband's suicide. He left behind his wife in her mid 30's and their seven year old daughter, Jade. Her story is one of heartache. On the outside she seemed so happy and positive, but inside she was really struggling. She was looking for hope and answers to the difficulties of her life.

Every day, there are people all around you that look like they have it all together, but inside they are really struggling. They are looking for hope and answers to the difficulties of their life. Behind the doors on your street there is heartache. In the cars around you as you drive down the street there is much pain. Behind the desks at your work are people who are looking for meaning in life. Sitting around you in the worship service on Sunday will be people who need encouragement.

May the Lord remind us today that we are His ambassadors. We are here to deliver His message to the world. May the Lord open our eyes to see the need people have for Jesus Christ. May the Lord give us the opportunities to speak Truth in love into people's lives. May the Lord use the members of NEHBC to influence our communities for Jesus Christ.