

The 25th Annual State of the Church Address was delivered on Sunday, January 26, 2003 at the Metropolitan Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. by the Reverend Doctor H. Beecher Hicks, Jr., Senior Minister. Copyright. © All rights reserved. This address may not be quoted in any form, written, electronic, visual or audio without the written consent of the author and Kerygma Associates, Inc.

Power, Purpose & Fire

“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth.’

Acts 1:8kjb

In the second writing of the Apostle Paul to the church at Thessalonica, the aged preacher from Tarsus gives four words of pastoral instruction.

*Rejoice evermore.
Pray without ceasing.
In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in
Christ Jesus concerning you.
Quench not the Spirit.¹*

Now in case you did not understand his instruction this is what Paul is saying. For those of you who are members of the church, for those of you who a part of the fellowship of the faithful, for those of you who are waiting on the second coming, waiting for the rapture, waiting to be caught up to meet Him, this is the word of instruction for you.

First of all, don't ever stop shouting!
The reason folk don't shout like you shout
is because they haven't been through what you've been through.

Second of all, don't ever stop praying.
Never forget that the source of your power
is not only in your praise, it is also
in your prayer.

Third of all, what God really wants you to do is to learn
how to say “thank you.”
Thank him for every little, itsy bitsy, teeny-weeny
tee-nienchy thing because that's the word God wants to hear!

And fourth of all, don't ever stop shouting.
Don't let anybody stop you from shouting.

¹ I Thessalonians 5: 16-19

Don't let anybody on your pew keep you from shouting.

To the Reverend Clergy.

To the Board of Deacons and its Chair, Mr. Donald M. Hines.

To the Board of Trustees and its Chair, Minister Brenda Girton Mitchell.

To the Board of Deaconesses and its Chair, Mrs. Ann Sloan.

To all of the presidents and chairs of the ministries, auxiliaries, boards and staffs of the subsidiary corporations of our Church.

To the precious people of God known as Metropolitan over whom I have been placed as priest and overseer and to all to whom these greetings should come:

I have come today to fulfill the instruction of the Apostle Paul and say "Thank you!" When Paul instructs that we should say "Thank you" I take his word quite literally. There are countless hundreds among you to whom I owe a debt of gratitude and for whom those two words ring feeble and inadequate.

Over the years I have not grown weary in this matter. Indeed, this is the 25th year that I have come to this sacred space in order to share with you the record of our stewardship in ministry and to speak of the State of the Church. There are some among us who are new to the fellowship and you do not quite understand. There are some among us who have been in this fellowship for many years and would prefer that this hour not be given to such internal matters. Nevertheless, I take seriously my responsibility to be accountable to you for the growth and development of this church. And that is why I mount this pulpit yet again to declare unto you that Metropolitan's ship is still sailing. We have encountered rough winds. We have sailed through high seas. But the Word of God is still our anchor. The Son of God is still our Captain. The Old Ship of Zion is sound and sea-worthy. Metropolitan is alive, and well, and blessed, and highly favored! To God be the glory.

Assessing our Challenges

We cannot gather in this place without an acknowledgement of the challenges we have faced in 2002. Our world and our nation are forever changed since the fatal events of September 11, 2001. Since then our nation has been engaged in a war on terrorism, conveniently forgetting that the enemies we now face are those we have created. We are poised for war in Iraq. We are facing enemies we cannot see for reasons many do not understand. Like it or not we are caught, somewhere between Washington and Baghdad, on the brink of a global conflict that will affect us all. To avoid this reality is to make a dreadful retreat into a realm of thought that is, at best, hopelessly naïve.

For the last year this has been the context of our ministry. Our church, along with individuals and institutions has been affected by the shifting sands of the nation's economy. While our congregation has risen to the challenge, still we could not

avoid the impact upon our financial resources. Regretfully, during this year we reached a point where our expenses exceeded our income.

In order to bring balance and stability to our finances, as well as to protect the fiscal integrity of the church, it became imperative to make difficult decisions that would impact our staff and cause us to make serious adjustments in the way we do ministry. My heart is still pained with the loss of those who mean so much to this church. The persons who are no longer engaged in this ministry have left an open wound for me and for the congregation as well. Several of our staff members were a part of a reduction in force that could not be avoided. I shall forever be indebted to them not only for their labor among us but for the sacrifice that they experienced individually and collectively. I take this moment to publicly acknowledge them, to thank them, and to assure them of our full intent, as we have assisted them in the past, to assist them in the future with their ministries and with their employment as they move forward in the service of our Christ.

Because of the reduction our remaining staff has been extremely burdened. I am profoundly grateful to Reverend Melvin Maxwell who is currently wearing three hats as Minister to Men, Minister to Youth and Minister of Outreach. I am also grateful to Dr. Sherrill McMillan who gives leadership to our counseling ministry, to IAMA, Inc., and to other ministries that I probably don't know anything about. Both Melvin and Sherrill have stepped to the plate and they deserve our gratitude.²

Because of the challenges we have faced this year it has been extremely important that our staff be committed to its work. There is a level of continuous service to the congregation that we must always appreciate. This is your staff, Metropolitan, and they are here to serve.³

In this connection, let me remind you that in July of this year I appointed Mrs. Denise Gibson-Bailey to serve as Interim Chief Operating Officer. I believe that this position is pivotal as we move toward excellence in service and use the

² We are also grateful to the numerous volunteers who give of their time and effort every day of the week answering the phones, folding programs and assisting with the daily work of the church. I cannot forget the work of our Associate Ministers who also have taken on their share of the burden. I give particular notice to Reverend Georgia Davis who has given countless hours of service in terms of our ministry of congregational care. Regretfully, we have received the resignation of Mr. Gary Drew who has given leadership to our Media Ministry. Gary has made a real contribution to our church life and we are grateful to him.

³ **The Metropolitan Staff:** Carol A. Minick, Rev. Melvin Maxwell, Dr. Sherrill McMillan, Rev. Nolan E. Williams, Jr., Richard Smallwood, Evelyn Curenton, F. Denise Gibson-Bailey, Madeliene Dobbins, Andrea Kittrell, Gary Drew, LoJuana F. Davis, Georgia Middleton, Alonzo Harmon, Trina Marcus, Erma Tate, Angela McPherson, Constance McCrimmon, Larry Thomas, Sylveta Brown, Janel Merritt, Shirlene Newman, Diedre Neal, Teresa Scott, Tim Steele, Danny Stewart, Chris Suggs, Jeff Twiggs, Dorothy Howard, Hazel Page, Kelvin Chase, Lawrence Taylor, Michael Campfield (Staff Member of the Year!), Dianna Combs, Kim c. Johnson, George Mills, Anita Williams, Cecil Hill, Phillip Murphy, Brenda Williams, Kyle Massenburg, Victor Mosley.

appropriate “best practices” as we move forward in ministry. Because of her distinguished corporate experience and knowledge of the work of the church, her competence as well as her diligence and because of the respect she has earned among the staff, I have now offered and she has accepted the full appointment as Chief Operating Officer for the church.

In days to come you will see a continuing pattern of growth and competence among our staff. You will also see that as the congregation’s commitment deepens and our financial health changes we will be able to restore our staff to more appropriate levels. I am pleased to report today that the strategic plan for economic correction is in place and is achieving its desired outcome. Stated succinctly, our income continues to rise, our expenses have gone down. Our bills are being paid. I am confident that God will continue to bless this ministry and give to us the needed human and financial resources we will need to continue.

Metropolitan is Ministry

The assessment we give today and indeed the assessment of these 25 years of ministry can only be as meaningful as the assessment of the parts that make up the whole. My purpose today is to assure you that significant work is being done throughout our community that constitutes a ministry of significant proportions of which you may be justifiably proud. Permit me to share with you some of the significant achievements of our ministry over the past year.

IAMA, INC. conducts its clinical services both at R Street and in its Largo offices. Over the year our clinical services have increased by 10% and Dr. McMillan has completed the first Counselor Training Services for Clergy and lay leaders. You will also be pleased to know that IAMA has completed Phase 1 of its planning for a residential substance abuse recovery project for women. In 2003, IAMA plans a domestic violence intervention project through the Department of Justice. That’s ministry.

Metropolitan Federal Credit Union is celebrating 47 years of financial service to our church and to its field of membership. With assets approaching \$1.5 million and more than 675 members, the Metropolitan Credit Union continues to be rated as one of the best small credit unions in the Washington metropolitan area. Last year, the Credit Union granted loans of more than \$178,000. That’s ministry!

Metropolitan/Delta Adult Literacy Program is a family literacy program focused on training adults in basic reading skills. The four primary programs offered are basic literacy, family literacy, GED and job training and Home Efforts to Lift Life’s Outcomes, a welfare-to-work outreach initiative. In 2002 the Metropolitan Delta Adult Literacy program provided tutoring to over 500 new adult readers. And that’s ministry.

Metropolitan Community Development Corporation welcomes Ms. Cheryl M. Thomas as its new Chief Executive Officer. Ms. Thomas comes to MCDC as an executive-on-loan from the Fannie Mae Corporation. Under her leadership, MCDC will continue to own and manage Miracle Plaza, our multi-building executive office complex in Largo, Maryland. Today we are proud to report that our occupancy rate has moved from 33 percent to 81 percent. In addition, MCDC in 2003 will work toward establishing a comprehensive wealth building program that will include financial literacy education, homeownership counseling and mortgage financing through community collaborative banking. Most especially, MCDC will participate in projects to provide affordable housing to low and moderate income residents in Washington and in Maryland. And that's ministry.

Metropolitan Day School, now in its fifth year of operation, is a Christian Learning village. At MDS we are *"Nurturing children...Changing lives!"* This past September under the able guidance of our principal, Mrs. W. Irene Woodard, we opened our doors to 150 bright-eyed children in pre-kindergarten through 7th grade, our first seventh grade class. Our children continue to score well above the national average in all standardized tests. The Day School employs more than 25 persons who are dedicated to the academic and spiritual development of our children. And I know that's ministry!

Metropolitan is more than a place. Metropolitan is more than praise and worship. Metropolitan is more than a building. Metropolitan is ministry – we are building people, affecting our communities, and changing lives. Metropolitan is ministry.

The Building of the Tabernacle

In 1991 our congregation began a journey that we called Vision2000. Little did we know that Vision2000 would lead us to and into a new millennium. We embarked on a journey that would take us "through many dangers, toils and snares" but would ultimately lead us to grasp and understand the vision that God has for us as a congregation.

The Old Testament instructs us that from time to time it is appropriate and necessary to rehearse what God has done. Permit me to remind you just what God has done for us.

December 1999

The church voted overwhelmingly to step out on faith in search of a land that God would show us.

April 7, 2000

The congregation voted to purchase 34 acres in Largo, Maryland. This land has

- A paved street with lights
- Curbs, gutters and fireplugs

- A water retention pond
- Is within walking distance of a new Metro stop
- Is situated within a residential community
- Is zoned for church use
- And is placed in a Charitable Remainder Trust so that at some future point all of the principle payments for the land will be returned to the church. In addition a secondary charitable trust of major proportions.

September 2000

The Metropolitan Community Development Corporation purchases two 3-story office buildings, renamed *Miracle Plaza*.

December 2002

Pledges received for the Millennium Building Campaign exceed \$5.5 million dollars.

Devroux & Purnell are consecrated as architects for the new Metropolitan Baptist Church

January 2003

Contracts signed for the sale of all church and non-church property that exceeds earlier estimation of sales proceeds by \$300,000.

And now, just a few days ago, I spoke to our architects and suggested to him as gently but as firmly as I know how that we are expecting to break ground for the new Metropolitan Baptist Church in January 2004!

Permit me just a parenthetical moment to say "Thank You" once again. Metropolitan owes a debt of gratitude to Attorney Madeleine Dobbins, our church counsel who, along with our Board of Trustees ably chaired by Minister Brenda Girton Mitchell, has worked tirelessly through a maze of negotiations and contract iterations to bring us to the completion of all of our sales. In addition, Metropolitan must express its appreciation to Ms. Carole Hoover and Mr. Howard Milstein, Mr. John Sanders and Ms. Sadie Winlock, all of Hoover Milstein who have given of their professional business counsel, assisted in day-to-day negotiations, provided legal services and have made financial contributions to our work. We literally could not have achieved all that we have without their unselfish contributions. You should know as well that Hoover Milstein has agreed to provide *pro-bono* financial consultation in order to ensure that our interests are protected and that our needs are fully met as we proceed toward the construction and permanent financing for our new church facility. We are collectively grateful.

Someone will surely ask, 'what does it all mean?' It means that **we must take seriously the responsibility for ministry**. The record of our ministry that I previously shared with you is only a prelude to the ministry that is before us. Until now we have been involved in a process of preparing to build the church externally. The architect is now about his work. The plans are being drawn. That's the exterior work. That work is underway.

Today we begin the process of designing a different kind of building. The architect will design the building from the outside. It is time for us now to design the building from the inside. What a terrible tragedy it would be to build a grand cathedral and then have **nothing to put in it**. More to the point, what a terrible tragedy it would be to build a grand cathedral and **nothing would come from it**.

There are several strategies that must be put in place if our movement to a new location is to have meaning and purpose.

First, we must be engaged in a process of **strategic planning** for the ministries as well as for the administrative matrix of our church. I have challenged the Official Board to design and implement such a plan not only for its internal work but for the entire work of the church. This is the time-worn truth: *"If we do not know where we are going, any road we take will get us there."* This is the time for us to ask questions regarding the meaning of our ministry.

- What are our strengths, our weaknesses, our opportunities, our threats?
- Whom do we serve? What is our market? What is our product?
- How do the persons we serve define their needs for us?
- How do we effectively plan to serve a cyberspace generation that is alienated from the church in general and organized religion in particular?
- How well are we using the resources that are available to increase our technological capacities as we seek to reach and touch this new generation?

Building a building may be the easiest task we face. Still, we have some difficult questions to answer:

What will be fundamentally different about what we are doing in the future as distinguished from what we are doing now?

How will our ministry in Largo and in Washington address the shifting needs of children, teenagers and senior adults?

How will our ministry address the interests of Hispanics and other emerging minorities?

How well prepared are we to handle the inescapable issues of our age: HIV Aids and the multiplicity of STD's that are a consequence of an increasingly sexual society? How will we handle issues of homelessness in Washington, in Capitol Heights and in Largo? What about our ministry will be so innovative and compelling that others will want to join us in our worship and in our ministry?

Until we have dealt seriously with these questions we will not have prepared ourselves to be the church that will live within the building. Our task then is literally to build the church from the inside out.

The challenge I have placed before the Official Board I now place before each ministry of this congregation. Over the next year I challenge each ministry, with guidance from the Council of Ministries so capably led by Deacon Charisse Williams, to seriously evaluate its current and future ministry. This is not to say that our present ministries are ineffective. There are numerous ministries whose work is exemplary.

- The **AIDS** ministry is active and quietly forging relationships all over the metropolitan area.
- The **Christian Discipleship Council** consistently provides quality Bible classes and educational programs for our spiritual growth.
- Our **Sunday School** under the leadership of Joseph Brown, continues to excel in providing meaningful Christian instruction.

And there are many other ministries whose work deserves commendation were it not for the press of time.

Nevertheless, we can and must do more. Every organization must be engaged in an intensive self-examination. Your examination must begin as a spiritual one.

- How does your ministry meet the requirements and expectations of God's word?
- If your ministry were taken out of Metropolitan Church today would the church suffer because it is gone?
- Is your ministry one of mediocrity or are you so excellent at what you do that you are literally defining the meaning of ministry now and for generations to come?

We are involved in a process of transition and change. I am aware, of course, that if anything at all frightens us we are frightened by transition and change. Yet, we serve a God of change. God orchestrates change. In Isaiah 43 God says: *I will do a new thing!* God specializes in change.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Over the last few months our music ministry has gone through a serious process of change. A part of that process of

change has been to change the name and the identity of the entire ministry. That's is why you have heard more and more about the Metropolitan Music Ministry or **Tri-M** as some prefer to call it. But the change is more than in the identity or the name. Under the capable and effervescent leadership of Reverend Nolan E. William, Jr., the ministry now has in place what he calls an Orientation of New Psalmists. The task and purpose of this orientation is to distinguish psalmists – a biblical designation – from a choir member (*a designation that ranges all the way from those who have operatic voices to those who can hardly carry a tune in a concrete bucket*). For eight weeks before they ever attend a rehearsal those who are interested in becoming a part of the music **ministry** as opposed to becoming a part of a **group of miscellaneous singers**, are engaged in training and preparation for their ministry. Reverend Williams is attempting to make these new psalmists aware of the power and purpose of the music ministry through an exploration of music history, biblical principles, as well as an intentional development of basic musical skills from singing to sight-reading. This is a process of gift assessment. To sing is not simply an exhibition of talent; it is the use of a God-given gift that must be nurtured to grow so that God can use the gift and gain the glory.

I mention this process simply as a matter of highlighting a process of internal change that will have consequences far beyond the choir rehearsal. Taken seriously, this kind of innovative change will affect the choirs, the worship, the preaching, and the work that goes on in the world as a consequence of what we do here.

We must build the church from the inside out. And the examination is one that must go beyond the organizational to the individual. Every member of this church must be prepared and empowered to become the future Metropolitan Baptist Church.

If you are not a member of a ministry, why not?

If you have not found a ministry that suits your needs, start one.

If you think things are not being done well, get up and do it yourself. If Metropolitan is not the church you want it to be then it's up to you to stop complaining, stop talking on the phone, stop sending e-mail, get involved, demonstrate your concern, use your gifts and skills, and help us build this church from the inside out.

Preserving Our Heritage

It should be obvious by now that I am not interested in building a church for the purpose of building a church. I am not interested in building a monument to

myself nor am I interested in building a church where people can shout but who have no social dimension of ministry that makes the shouting worthwhile.

It should also be obvious that I have some commitment to the District of Columbia and to Metropolitan's historic place within it. That is why I have repeatedly and consistently declared my intention to preserve a Metropolitan presence in Washington, DC even after we have moved the primary worship facility to Largo, Maryland.

Let me help you understand where we are in all of this. First of all, you should know that the sale of what we refer to as the "non-church" properties has been completed. As a part of the sale of that property two provisions of the sale will be of interest to this congregation. The property will be developed as condominiums both on 13th Street and on R Street. In the R Street development 3,800 square feet of space will be designated for the exclusive use of Metropolitan Baptist Church. The only cost for the space will be for the build-out. The construction of the space will be free to the church. In addition, there will be at least four condominium units that will be sold back to the church at a rate of **15%** under market value. This means that Metropolitan will still be on R Street!

We must address the issue of how this space will be used. Our goal must be to leave a lasting contribution to the District; we must ensure that our leaving R Street does not mean that we have abandoned this city or the people who live within it. We must engage the community in dialogue regarding the appropriate uses of the space for social ministry to ensure that we serve the needs of the community and not our own. There are, I believe, many options before us. Among them are transitional housing for homeless women and children, continued office space for Metropolitan/Delta Adult Literacy Program which may be expanded to include services for the rapidly growing immigrant population in collaboration with Latino social services agencies in our community, service facilities for Metropolitan's Street Ministry, as well as programs designed for senior citizens and other special interest groups. Don't forget that the Metropolitan Day School will remain in northeast Washington. Metropolitan will be one church but we will serve in three separate locations.

Fundamentally, we are saying that we will keep our promise to extend Metropolitan's life and presence within the District. At the appropriate time a group will be convened to consider this issue and you will have an opportunity both to help design it and to bring it to fruition.

Financing the Tabernacle

Finally, we must give serious consideration to the financial implications of the decisions we have reached and the actions we have taken regarding our new church home. Now that the contracts for sale have been signed and the

architectural work has begun, we must give thought to the matter of our commitment to this sacred task.

In November of this year the congregation was asked to make commitments to the Millennium Hope Fund. We have now received your commitments, despite difficult economic times, of **\$5.5 million dollars**. These commitments, as magnificent as they are, represent the intention of only **811** members. This means that of **6,000** members only **12.4%** of the membership has participated.

Now before you get worried about numbers let me remind you that Moses started out trying to get across the Anacostia River – I mean the Red Sea - with millions and only 2 made it in. Moses sent twelve men to spy out the land and only 2 came back with a good report. Jesus started out trying to build the Kingdom with only 12 men: one deserted, some others went fishing, and one committed suicide. I'm not worried about the numbers; I'm worried about the commitment that must accompany the numbers.

It means more than that, however. Let's do the math. If **6,000** members pledged **\$5.5million dollars** it means that the average pledge was for **\$6,782** over a three year period of time. Take that same average and multiply it by **6,000** and it means that we have the *capacity* for a pledge of over **\$40 million dollars**. It means that we could do all we want, pay cash for it, and then have **\$10 million** in the bank to endow the ministry of the church for years to come. In other words, everything we need is in the house!

Three things are necessary today. If you have not made your **commitment** to the Hope Campaign please do so now. Lean over. Take the pledge card out of the holder. Your neighbor will loan you a pen. Write out your pledge. Give your neighbor her pen back! At the end of this service bring your pledge to me or place it in an offering plate that is being held at the door. The more money we give, obviously the less we will have to borrow and we will not build the Lord's house in debt. Even if you don't like to make pledges because you're not sure you can keep it, please make a commitment today. We must make our pledges and fulfill them in order to demonstrate to other contributors, banks and financial institutions that Metropolitan is firmly and fully committed to this building process. Our financial strategy will succeed only if we keep our Hope Fund commitments. It is not a question of whether we can do this. We know we can do it. I believe Paul is right. ***"I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."***

Following the commitment, you must **give consistently**. It is one thing to make a pledge; it is another thing to keep the pledge. Now that we have contracted with our architect and will soon be contracting with other technical service providers it is critical that you give your pledge (*in addition to your tithes and offerings*) with consistency and regularity.

This is the way it works: You have not made a pledge to the church. You have not made a pledge to the Pastor. You have made a pledge to God that you will do what you have said you will do. Based on our belief that you will keep your pledge to God, the Board of Trustees will be in the process of making pledges to other persons to provide the services we will need. We must average \$35,000 each week in the Hope Fund for the next three years. I cannot tell you how critically important this is. Now that we have sold the church and we have 3 years to complete this project, if you have never taken a pledge seriously before in your life, do so now.

The final thing that will be required is **loyalty**. These are days when people are simply not loyal to their church. If they don't like what's going on, they leave. If they don't like the music, the choir or the choir director, they leave. If they don't like the preacher, they leave. If they don't like people asking for money, they leave. I rise to day to ask you to stay. I rise to ask you to hang on in there. I rise to assure you that a better day is coming. Now that we have come this far we must stay together. We must pray together. We must plan together. We must worship together. We must shout together. No matter what we have or don't have – I don't believe He brought us this far to leave us!

A Word from His Word!

The words of this text are familiar to every believer.

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues as the spirit gave them utterance.⁴

Perhaps you will agree with me that these words are not only familiar they are strange. Let me tell you how strange.

The church is now in the birth canal of history. On a dusty road somewhere near Caesarea Philippi he spoke directly to a fisherman whose name was Peter. *Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*⁵ Wait a minute. You don't understand. This is strange. Jesus has surrounded him self with twelve of the worst men he could find. They are the ruffians, they are the outcasts; they are the poverty stricken, the uneducated, they are the radical rejects of society, and with them he intends to build a church.

⁴ Acts 2:1-4

⁵ Matthew 16:16

This is strange. He tells them strange things. He tells poor men they can be rich. He tells those who live in the ghetto they can be a city on a hill. He tells them if they want to be first they have to be last, if they want to be served they must become servants, if they want to receive they must learn how to give and if they want to live they must die. And with this kind of philosophy He intends to build a church. Strange.

For three years twelve men interrupted their professional careers and followed Him all because He wanted to build a church, something He called the Kingdom of God. For three years twelve men followed in the footsteps of a bearded and barefoot Galilean. For three years twelve men have stood by His side while he fed 5000 with 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread. They have watched Him while he threw away the crutches of paralytics, performed psycho-therapy in a cemetery, and then gave sight to a man born blind. They stood amazed while He conversed with a prostitute down by Jacob's well, told sick men how to get rid of the lesions of their leprosy and then watched Him when He stood in a boat and told winds to hush and told waves to sit still. And He did all that because He said He wanted to build a church.

If you understand this text you will understand that it is not only familiar it is strange. They were not sure; they did not understand what He was asking them to do that night when He said to them *'you need to go get a room.'* It turned out to be an attic; but it was just a room. Nobody had been there for quite a while; it was dark, and dank, and smelled of the years of neglect and misuse – just a room. It didn't look like much of a church – just some tables and some pillows to lie around on, just a place to have the Passover and sing a hymn. It was just a room. But something happened in that room. Some broken bread. Some spilled wine. Yet, something happened in that room that would alter the course of human history. *And when they had sung a hymn they went out.*

And you know what happened when they went out. Tell me what happened! A prayer meeting in Gethsemane. An arrest in a garden. An ear cut off and restored. First to Caiaphas the High Priest, then to Pilate's Judgment Hall, on to Herod's Palace and then back to Pilate's Judgment Hall. All night long they beat Him. All night long they spat on Him. All night long they tore his garments and divided them among themselves. And then on Friday He carried his cross up a hill. On Friday He carried His cross to a hill just outside the city wall – they called it the Hill of the Skull. On Friday they placed nails in his hands and his feet and then He died. They buried Him in Joseph's brand new tomb; they rolled a stone in place and sealed it with the imprimatur of Rome. Strange.

But then on Sunday, something strange. Somebody said, *'he is not here but risen as he said.'* Something about resurrection. *'he is not here but risen as he said.'*

And this is why it is all so strange. For, when you arrive in the Acts of the Apostles you will find Him along with these men in a room. That's where they started – in a room. And now they have returned to a room. But now He's talking about how to do it. To twelve men who didn't have a clue about how to build a church, he's talking about how to do it. To twelve men who had no organizational skills, who had no budget, who had no interpersonal skills, and who could not go buy bread without having a discussion about it – these are the men to whom He talks and with them He intends to build a church. Strange.

But there is a word here. Look at the text:

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you.

If you want to build a church you will need power. Your problem is that you don't have power. On your own you don't have any power. By your own devices you don't have any power. If you are depending on yourselves or if you are depending on each other, I'm sad to tell you, you don't have power. You need more than power to be; you need power to become. You need more than power to shout; you need power to serve. The word for power here is the Greek word *dunamis*. What it means is that you need more than human power; you need supernatural power.

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you.

There is another word here. If you want to build a church you will need more than power; you will need purpose. Whatever you do ought have purpose. If you want to build a church don't build it just because you want to build it; it ought to have purpose. If it has no purpose it's just a structure. If it has no purpose it's just four walls with a cross on top. If it has not purpose it's just an arena for spiritual entertainment. It ought to have purpose.

And ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, And unto the uttermost parts of the earth.

I know you want to build a church but you can't stay in the room.

I know you want a place where you can sing and shout and then tell folk what a time you had but you can't stay in the room.

It's about ministry in Jerusalem. It's about missions in Samaria. It's about social justice in Samaria. It's about peace in a world determined to be at war. It's alright to build the church but you can't stay in the room. Strange.

Is it all right if I preach for 5 more minutes? Acts 1 says that the Disciples needed to have power and purpose. That's what it says. But Acts 2 says I not only need power and purpose, I need fire.

***And there appeared unto them cloven tongues
like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.***

Ah, let me talk about fire. If I understand fire, if I understand the elements of fire, fire tends to heat up a cold situation. I know you may not like it but if the Holy Spirit is present there's going to be some fire somewhere. I know you like to be "laid back," I know you don't like for anybody to see you sweat but if the Holy Spirit steps into your life there's going to be some fire somewhere.

Moses had to take off his shoes on Mount Sinai because when he stood in the presence of God he was standing in the presence of **fire**.

In the year that King Uzziah died Isaiah's lips got burned at the altar, the house was filled with smoke, and angels had hot coals taken from the **fire** on the altar.

Jeremiah tried to stay home one Sunday morning but he wound up going to church anyhow because he had **fire** shut up in his bones.

Elijah caused a disturbance on Mount Carmel because he was up against 450 prophets of baal and wood that had been soaked with water. But when it was all said and done there was nothing but ashes on Mount Carmel because God sent some **fire**. Somebody ought to hear me today.

And I don't know about you but I don't want to have any religion that doesn't have any fire.

When somebody prays there ought to be some fire.

When somebody sings there ought to be some fire.

When somebody gives the announcements there ought to be some fire.

When somebody preaches the Gospel there ought to be some fire. When souls are saved there ought to be fire.

When lives are changed there ought to be fire.

When sins are forgiven there ought to be fire.

When burdens are lifted there ought to be fire.

And, the thing I like about it, if you've got fire you can't hide it. If you've got fire you can't keep it to yourself.

Let me share a personal word about fire. The problem with fire is that sometime it goes out. The problem with fire is that sometime the elements that surround you work against you and put your fire out. The problem with fire is that sometime when you need to energizing presence of fire, something happens that

causes your fire to go out. The problem with fire is that sometime just when you need it most your fire goes out.

Maybe that's not the way it is with you but that's the way it is with me. I stand to confess to you today that there have been times when my fire has nearly gone out. There have been days when my head has drooped, my energy spent and I have no fire to continue. I confess today that there have been those moments when I really did not want to continue, I would have preferred to hang my ecclesiastical garments upon some hook of hopelessness. My fire has nearly gone out. I confess there have been times when I have come to this pulpit burdened by the struggle to cast a vision and to have that vision received and my fire has nearly gone out. I confess that there have been those days when I have wondered if God had someone else to stand in this place. Why else would I feel loneliness, depression and despair? My fire has nearly gone out. I confess that there have been those days when I have struggled to come to this very place knowing that I did not need to preach; I needed to be preached to. My fire has nearly gone out.

That was the problem highlighted in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. If you read *Pilgrim's Progress* you will discover that *Interpreter* took *Christian* by the hand and led him to a place where a fire was burning against the wall. And there was a man standing by the fire and all he did was throw water on the fire. But the more he threw water the more the fire burned and even hotter still.

And *Christian* didn't understand. What does it mean that there's a fire here and somebody's throwing water on the fire but the fire keeps on burning.

Said *Interpreter*, that man standing by the fire throwing water on the fire is the devil. Every time you stand up to do a work for God the devil throws water on it. Every time you stand up to preach the devil is standing right by your pulpit ready to throw water on it. Every time you have a vision of what God wants you to do, the devil throws water on it.

But come here! Let me show you something. On the other side of the fireplace he saw a man with a vessel of oil in his hand. He was throwing oil on the fire. And every time he threw oil on the fire the fire would burn hotter. That man's name is Jesus. And every time the devil throws water on your fire, Jesus throws oil on your fire. And all I came here to tell you today is "Thank God for Jesus." The slaves had it right.

*Sometimes I feel discouraged
And think my works in vain;
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again!*

And, by the way, since he still lights my fire, since He keeps putting oil on my fire, since He keeps on lighting my path, since He keeps on turning my midnight into morning, since He keeps on blessing me, I thought I'd tell you:

First of all, don't ever stop shouting!
The reason folk don't shout like you shout
is because they haven't been through what you've been through.

Second of all, don't ever stop praying.
Never forget that the source of your power
is not only in your praise, it is also in your prayer.

Third of all, what God really wants you to do is to learn
how to say "thank you."
Thank him for every little, itsy bitsy, teeny-weeny
tee-nienchy thing because that's the word God wants to hear!

And fourth of all, don't quench the Spirit.
Don't ever stop shouting.
Don't let anybody stop you from shouting.
Don't let anybody on your pew keep you from shouting.