PULPIT POWER

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Category: John Fifteen

INTRODUCTION

A pastor, a plumber, a pulpit

Bryden Falls Community Christian Center

Bryden Falls.....skirting the Canada-U.S. border.....somewhere in western Canada

The Challengers.....a church men's baseball team.....in a secular league

Challenging American baseball supremacy

CHAPTER ONE

friday, january 21st, 1994, 3:00 p.m.

"Jesus be praised!" Terry Maclin recognized Roo's horn announcing the arrival of the awaited cargo. Through the window he could see *Reuben's Plumbing* van backing toward the front entrance of the just-completed church. He opened both doors and emerged in the late winter afternoon, donning his heavy work jacket. He had waited eight months for this moment.

"Roo!" the pastor yelled over the sound of the motor and tires crunching the fresh January snow.

"Pastor Mac," Reuben returned the greeting from the open van window, not losing his concentration backing up. *Pastor Maclin* had years before been altered to *Pastor Mac.* Reuben Tanner had been simplified to *Roo.* Nicknames are common here at 'the Center', *Bryden Falls Community Christian Center.* Years of familiarity will do that. And so will baseball.

The heavy pulpit slid from the van with ease onto the cart wagon Roo borrowed from one of his suppliers, and soon the aged treasure was escorted on its belly through the doors by pastor and plumber, down the newly carpeted aisle to its awaiting place in the center of the elevated stage. It was big, much larger than one would expect for a church that housed a maximum 500 people, and heavy, reinforced with steel, sides and front paneled in oak, the base filled with lead for stability, a large rounded and tilted slab of oak topping the proud and stately structure. But the two were strong and able, and soon the pulpit was where it belonged, the base sitting perfectly into a square left by the carpet installers.

"It fits!" Roo was surprised how everything came together in this building project undertaken mostly by amateurs. He had been in construction long enough to know even those projects done by journeyman trades were susceptible to miscues. Projects by the inexperienced were usually an unbroken series of calamities start to finish.

Mac was less surprised. This building project had been bathed in prayer since the sod turning ceremony at which time he challenged the women's prayer group, headed by his Vivian, to cover this project in prayer until the pulpit was set in place, signifying completion.

Sunday, march 14th, 1993, 3:30 p.m.

Ladies. Assistant Superintendent Martin Johnston of head office related to me just how distressing a building project of this size can be to a congregation, and suggested we approach this cautiously. I extend this warning to you today.

But first, let me recap how we got to where we now are, on the verge of a major building project.

As most of you know, Bryden Falls Community Christian Center had its beginning in our living room in 1989 when Vivian and I, newlyweds and graduates of Norwest Seminary, began a neighborhood Bible study. By God's favor we steadily grew in number until squeezed out of our home. In 1990 we, that is, the congregation we had become, rented the vacant small country schoolhouse we are now in. Due to favorable articles in national and international magazines, many have discovered Bryden Falls to be an excellent mid-size town to raise a family or spend retirement years. The Center *grew at even a faster pace than our town. The school board needs its school back, and last year we were forced to make a decision.*

The options facing your church board were to either lease or purchase a suitable commercial building, or have a church built. After much scanning of real estate possibilities and exhaustive discussions, the board of elders approached the congregation with a recommendation to build. The congregation voted 80 percent in favor of that recommendation. The board then had preliminary plans drawn up for a church complex that included a sanctuary accommodating 300 people, a pastoral office, a kitchen, rooms for prayer and Bible study and board meetings, and a nursery. They also made an offer on a three-acre lot next to Bryden Falls Baseball Park, subject to the approval of the congregation. This approval was attained.

Although the cost of the proposed building and land was within our means, I realized the building would probably only be suitable for a few years if we continue to grow as we have, at which time we would be facing another disruptive building project. I proposed that we, the congregation, do most of the building ourselves so that we could have a larger complex at the same cost. A contractor would build the shell of the building, and we would take over from there. This proposal prompted much apprehensive discussion, understandably, and it was accepted on the condition that I accept the responsibility of overseeing the project. To this I agreed.

Ladies, I need your help.

Although I cannot deny being gifted with an organizational skill, I have scant construction experience. I believe the success or failure of this project, our project, will be determined by the quality of undergirding prayer. Soon our contractor will pour the footings, and six weeks later the roofing will be installed, and the bulk of the project will be ours to finish. I anticipate eight months later the pulpit will be installed, the very last detail, signaling the end of our building project. That will be January, next year. Between these times there will be sore muscles, some bruises, frayed nerves, late night meetings, various complaints, misunderstandings and miscommunication. The one who comes "to steal, and to kill, and to destroy" will be vigilant for inroads to disrupt the unity we have nurtured over the years, thus thwarting God's plan for the Center.

Most in the congregation already live full lives; where will the extra needed energy come from? Many of us are white collars; where will the required skills come from? Where will the wisdom come from? And protection from injury? They will come from God. And they will come through the faith of His intercessors.

This is what I propose. There will never be less than five ladies on any given day carrying the responsibility of the building project, sustaining through prayer every detail of construction of which there will be dozens. Five ladies will bear the responsibility for one month, and then five others will pick up the rotation. Each group will be fully informed of the happenings, the needs, potential problems. I will communicate these to Vivian regularly, and she will in turn communicate to the group of five. And anything you want to relay to me - any suggestions or questions - will be communicated to me through Vivian.

Ladies, I invite you, I challenge you. Will you embrace the responsibility of this building project?

friday, january 21st, 1994, 5:15 p.m.

The plumber removed the cover in the floor at the base of the pulpit revealing a large junction box containing marked wires, jacks and receptacles. He connected the microphone to one of the jacks. The sound system worked fine. Next, he connected the two fluorescent lights, concealed by an oak valance near the bottom of the pulpit, to shine upward and dramatically light the underside of the slanted oak top. A-okay. And the reading light worked. He connected the switch inside the pulpit that was to control two of the overhead ceiling spotlights. Everything worked great. One more thing to do.

Terry - Mac - had brought a bottle of furniture polish and a handful of rags. Neither were chatterers, and with young strong arms they worked the polish into the oak without disturbing the quiet of the church, Terry Maclin on one side of the proud pulpit, Reuben Tanner on the other. It was fitting the pastor and the plumber got to do this final touch, not only on the pulpit, but the entire undertaking, for much more than anyone else they poured their hearts and energy and skills into the building project. It was a sweet moment. Life has too many disappointments, expectations seldom

materialize, plans go awry. But this was a triumph. The entire building project was complete, on schedule, below budget. And the congregation was not only intact, but more strongly bonded.

Neither noticed the old man silent and still in the shadows of the foyer, a pleasant oddity, a whisper of a man, an enigma who made occasional visits to the *Center* and elsewhere, always arriving late for the service and leaving early, always a kindly smile, always a noble dignity. Some said he was prophetic, others thought him a maverick. *Savor the moment, Mac and Roo!,* he silently phrophesied, *Bask in the triumph! For life will deal you ample afflictions to humble your souls. One day a tempest will visit your assembly. Ferocious and destructive, it will buffet you, test your faith, jeopardize the congregation you love. Brother will turn on brother, sister against sister.*

Much water will pass under the bridge, seasons will tumble over each other, there will be a mingling of baptisms and weddings and funerals and baby dedications. The carpet you stand on will be twice replaced. And then it will come. As a thief in the night. Dark and nasty.

Mac twisted the cap back on the bottle of polish, Roo gathered the rags into a plastic bag, together they steered the cart to the van. Fully satisfied, they shook hands and embraced, January snow flaking their black baseball caps.

“Love you, Roo.”

“Love you, Pastor Mac.”

saturday, april 7th, 2007, 10:00 a.m.

“Did you remember the 11:30 oil change this morning?” Vivian Maclin asked her husband.

“No.”

“The luncheon with Trevor Kenny?”

“Yes.”

“Your first baseball practice at 2:30?”

“Looking forward to it.”

Vivian Maclin shouldered her share plus, plus, of home and church. Terry had learned her ability to keep the machinery running surpassed his, and over the years deferred to her management, giving him coveted time for reflection and fun.

“Reuben Tanner phoned for an appointment.”

“Oh?”

“Problem?”

“Roo hasn’t made an appointment for years.”

"I fitted him in Monday, 1:00 pm."

"Fine."

"Do you want me to cancel the oil change?"

"Any hint as to why he wanted to see me?"

"No. Baseball, perhaps?"

"No, I'm sure not that."

"Concerned?"

"His last appointment didn't go well. That was at least three years ago. That was the last time we spoke of spiritual matters."

"What time is your lunch with Trevor Kenny?"

"Twelve at *The Coffee House*."

"Twelve-*thirty* at *The Coffee House*," Vivian corrected.

"Oh."

"You haven't forgotten the twins birthday supper at 5:30. I am having it early so you will still have time to prep for tomorrow. The men working on the floor in the sanctuary should be finished late afternoon so the sanctuary will be all yours this evening."

"Eighteen years old. Amazing. Makes me feel middle-aged." It saddened Mac that the image of successful, young pastor was receding with his hairline. "I didn't have these grey hairs at their last birthday." *Hair coloring is a great invention,* he reflected. "Who is going to be there?"

"Kyle and Katie both decided to invite the band for supper, and everyone will be invited to the birthday party tomorrow after the service." It was much easier for Vivian to hide *her* grey than the detested weight that long ago transformed the slender into thick.

"Then John Tanner will be there. Reuben raised a fine boy."

"Reuben and Jenni," Vivian corrected again. "All five children seem to be doing well. John celebrated his eighteenth a few months ago. Kyle and John have been close since childhood."

"And Katie?" Nothing would make Mac happier than to have John for a son-in-law one day, a thought he would never express to anyone, not even his wife.

"What is it exactly that Pastor Mac is asking?"

"Nothing. Nothing."

"Shall I cancel the oil change?"

"No."

"I'm going home to prepare the birthday supper. Don't be late."

"Not a chance."

Alone now, Mac took his eyes off the monitor where he had been perusing past sermons on the Holy Spirit in preparation for tomorrow's message, placed both feet on his desk, intending to do some serious Saturday morning musing while sipping Vivian's coffee. *Excellent coffee. She does everything right.*

Vivian was responsible for this spacious office. The first thing Mac and Roo had done after the building contractor had left, fourteen years ago, was mark out all the rooms on the concrete floor with red chalk, including doors and windows, and invited everyone in the congregation to inspect and suggest improvements. Vivian insisted they replace the wall separating the pastoral office and the boardroom with folding doors. Brilliant. The boardroom would mostly be wasted space except for a few hours every week; this way Mac's office more than doubled in size. Mac was a pacer, and pushing the long table against the wall gave him plenty of pacing space. He could use the table for sorting papers, eating lunch, whatever. *How claustrophobic this office would be without Vivian's insight,* he mused. She also insisted on larger windows to bring the outside in, and a wider, higher door to emphasize the office and the husband who occupied. It was she who decorated the office, arranged the furniture, hung pictures and Mac's diplomas and license, chose the lighting. Smartly she color coordinated office and boardroom.

Mac walked over to one of three boardroom windows, a favorite staring-out spot overlooking *Bryden Falls Baseball Field. Another season about to begin. Sixth year in the American league. Last place of eight teams every year except last year. Last year number five. We made them nervous. This year the playoffs, one of the top four.*

The men's team practiced throughout the winter in a school gym, throwing the ball, picking up grounders, hitting wuffle balls off a tee, rehearsing plays. Mac was a steely pitcher and a skilled coach. A coach must communicate, chatter constantly, teach and then repeat again and again, be enthused and energetic, exude strength and confidence. Over and over he taught his men:

Baseball is a mathematical science to be approached with a mathematical mindset. How far should a runner lean off first base if he intends to steal second? Calculate the pitcher's pickoff throw to first base, his speed and likely accuracy. How fast can you make it to second? Is the pitcher due to throw a fastball or a curve or a change-up? You don't want to steal on a fastball. Does the catcher have a good arm or mediocre? If mediocre, you can play it safe by staying closer to first. If it's a hot day, his throw will be faster because his arm will be looser, so lean off first a bit further. How far into the season? --- the risk increases as the season progresses because their efficiency goes up.

Think. Calculate. Concentrate. Have a winning attitude. Be a warrior.

Fitness is more important in baseball than most think. It's not a lazy man's sport. You must be as alert in the ninth inning as the first. Most mistakes happen in the later innings simply because weariness sets in. Get on the treadmill. All winter. Pair up and be accountable to each other.

You have made a decision to join a team. A team. You not only play with each other but for each other. We have set a goal of excellence at the Center. What we do we do well, as unto the Lord.

Mac was looking forward to seeing his marine buddy, Trevor Kenny. *Trevor the Tree,* the neighborhood kids had called him. Only on a basketball team would his height go unnoticed. In the marines he was *Tree* Kenny. Life was mean to Tree and since it was hard to be mad at life he was mad at God. He would have nothing to do with Mac's Christ. But Mac loved him dearly, having shared the nightmare of combat, and was not ashamed to tell him so.

And then his thoughts bounced in another direction. *Why does Roo want to see me? What's so important that a phone call wouldn't do? We will be seeing each other at practice, why not grab me then?* It has been a long time since Roo had made an appointment. *Three years ago?* Mac tried to recall. *No, more like five.* Roo was nervous that day. A pastor's office can do that. The many shelves of hardcover books were directly in Roo's view as they sat across the rich mahogany desk from each other. Vivian arranged them that way. Mac read less then half of them, and probably would never open the rest. Were they simply part of the décor? Or intended to make an impression? And the framed diplomas? To add leverage?

Mac never challenged his wife. Although Vivian worked without financial compensation, at least not directly - Mac had no doubt his generous wage reflected Vivian's labors - she did not come without price. She, too, had gained much leverage. Undoubtedly she was the second most influential person at the *Center,* even more than Phil Ferguson the assistant pastor, certainly far ahead of any on the board of elders.

And there was his suit and tie. It was expected of Mac to give proper respect to his office, his position of shepherd of the sheep. But he knew a suit can be imposing over those dressed casual. That's why a car salesman wears a suit. It gives him leverage.

Mac felt affronted by Roo's questions five years previous: *Why does the Bible not seem to harmonize with the way we do things at the* Center?.....*with the way* most *evangelical churches perform church functions?.....where can I find biblical examples, or least some hint, of church denominations?.....why can't everyone decide for him/herself to tithe or not tithe?.....it doesn't seem right this should be a requirement for membership.....*

Mac had heard enough, and cut him off. "My friend, listen to me. I represent our denomination. I do not set policy. I have confidence in those to whom I am accountable. I trust in the judgment of others more knowledgeable in Scripture than I.

"If we debated every policy and practice of the *Center* we would get bogged down in nonessentials. I for one believe we are called to do good works, not to build a perfect church. We both know that's an impossibility. If we become focussed on ourselves, if we become overly introspective, we will be ineffective in our community we are trying to influence for God.

"We must be sensitive to the unity we have fostered at the *Center* over the years. Congregational unity is a delicate thing, easily disrupted. We should ask ourselves if making what we think would be improvements is worth the risk."

Perhaps I blew it, Mac thought. *Should honest inquiry be suppressed? I closed the door to open communication with someone who has applied himself so faithfully to the growth of this church.* And yet Mac was well aware of several churches in the denomination now anguishing in division. Ever the faithful shepherd, he would do whatever necessary to protect his church from discontented, questioning laymen.

Eleven o'clock. Oil change, and then meet up with Tree.

monday, january 12th, 1990, 9:15 a.m.

Jeni Tanner loved her new log house set on a hillside in the middle of their twenty acres parcel of mostly treed land. Washing breakfast dishes at the sink she could see through the large window much of the city of Bryden Falls nestled in the valley bottom far below. And she could make out the path of the river that hurriedly meandered throughout its population racing to the falls just outside of town where it fell through fifty feet of air, crashing to the rocks below, in the summer a tourist fascination. The brownish log walls and the tamarack crackling in the enormous stone fireplace that took up an entire living room wall made the house snugly warm, but would have been overly dark, even with the large windows, were it not for the half-dozen ceiling skylights letting in the outside brightness. It's been two years now, Jeni reflected, since she and Reuben left the north country.

With the completion of Reuben's four-year plumbing apprenticeship they were free to start a new life in the locality of their choice. So the recently married couple went shopping for a city - away from the cold of the North, clean air, not too big yet big enough to sustain another plumbing business. Four weeks after they set out they slowly drove through what could have been their twenty-fifth or thirtieth city, Bryden Falls, touching the north side of the Canadian-American border.

"Let's turn around," Jeni suggested. Soon the slender young lady and the burly young man were walking hand-in-hand down the streets, inspecting parks and playgrounds and schools, talking to a gas station attendant and a waitress and a few friendly pedestrians, getting a feel for the place.

"I like it!" Jeni said at last. "I like it very much!"

"This is home," Reuben agreed. "This is where we will raise our family."

"Five children?"

"Five children."

They spent days driving the outskirts in search of just the right property at just the right price at just the right distance from town. As soon as they secured land with a twenty-percent down payment they set up a tent, saving rent money for their new house. The first thing they did was thin out the trees, and the money from the valuable timber paid for much of the construction. Reuben was more than a qualified licensed plumber; he inherited his dad's aptitude for building. Reuben and Jeni both worked hard and long hours through four seasons, no laziness to be found in either. Today barefoot John Douglas Tanner was taking his first steps on the warm living room floor.

But all was not well.

Neither the house of her dreams, nor the lovely panorama stretched out before her, not even the contented sounds of her beautiful baby John could console her sorrowing heart. Had Jeni Tanner known her husband's dark side she would never have married him.

saturday, april 7th, 2007, 12:30 p.m.

"I'll get that," Tree offered after he and Mac both ordered soup, sandwich and coffee at the counter.

"You'll what? You are actually going to pay?" Mac teased. "What's the occasion?"

"Hey man, you got it last time."

"And the time before that and the time before that."

"Okay, so I've got a bit of catching up to do," Tree grinned a rare grin through his bushy walrus mustache. "You know, it's easier on the budget if the other guy pays."

"Is that why you forget your wallet in the car?"

"Remember the time we both forgot our wallets?"

"Yeah, embarrassing," Mac replied. "I was trying to get you back. The next time I forget I'll let you know in advance."

"Common courtesy."

Mac's solid six-foot stature would make him appear formidable standing beside most, but not so beside his bud. While Mac's stride to a corner table revealed agility, Tree's long legs swung like stiff stilts. Mac sat down; Tree plopped into his chair. Mac sat erect; Tree's slouch extended to the next table. Mac's hair was short and trim; Tree's was almost to his shoulders. Mac's bright rounded face was non-threatening, even approachable; Tree's frown seemed to be permanently chiseled in his rugged, mustached face.

"So let's get down to business," Mac said to his friend.

"Yes, baseball business. Here's this year's schedule." Tree was the president of the division's *American Northwestern Men's Baseball League* consisting of eight teams, Mac's *Challengers* being the lone Canadian team. Tree was also head coach of the *Grizzlies* who took first place the last three years, and their starter pitcher. At the beginning of each season he drove to the various cities to meet up with the other coaches to go over the scheduling, and respond to complaints and potential problems.

"Look okay?" Tree asked.

"Everything's okay except that two of the playoff games are on Sunday morning when we have our service."

"You don't have to worry about that, man; you've never made the playoffs yet."

"Hey!" Mac feigned hurt feelings.

"What's it like at the bottom?" Tree wanted revenge for the forget-the-wallet ribbing.

"I don't remember; last year we were fifth place. This year the playoffs."

"Oh, I do understand Christians believe in miracles."

"We also believe in practice. We've been in a gym all winter. We are set to go. We are determined to make the playoffs this year. We'll show you pagans."

"That would be embarrassing," Tree responded.

"Embarrassing?"

"Can you imagine how embarrassing it would be for the four teams who got beat out by a *church* team, a *Canadian* church team?"

"Yes, I have imagined it."

"Is there no pity in you, man?"

"Not much."

"Just how did you manage to put together a baseball team from one congregation? Do you pick up extras from outside your church?"

"Nope. Only those attending the *Center* can play on the *Challengers.* The Lord sends us baseball players, a few are above average, and we fill in the other positions the best we can. Even our new assistant pastor plays ball. And we have a few players coming up from minor league."

"Who?"

"My son, Kyle and Roo's son, John."

"How old?"

"Eighteen. Just."

"The league manual specifically states that the minimum age is nineteen," Tree pretended sternness.

"I know. But my best friend is the pres."

"You Christians! Five years ago we show a little compassion by allowing you - a Canadian church team - into the league, and now you're trying to bend the rules." Tree was thoroughly enjoying himself.

"You wouldn't have let us in if you didn't need another team."

"True," Tree conceded. "Seven is an awkward number when it comes to scheduling. We thought you guys would be a good team to practice with, a real confidence builder."

"Fooled you last year, didn't we?"

Time to change the subject. "Is John Tanner as good as his dad?"

"No one in the league matches Roo. A great catcher, and as you know the highest batting average of all eight teams."

"Tell me about it. I pitch to him, remember? He connects to everything I throw at him."

"He used to be better."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"He became a Christian."

"What? He became a Christian and his batting average went down?"

"That's right."

"Tell me about it, man." Tree sensed Mac wasn't kidding.

"When I first met Roo, he was, well, shall we say, *un-nice."*

"Un-nice? Never heard that word before."

"I just invented it; it's a kinder word than *jerk.* That was many years ago when we were playing other church teams. Jeni was attending the services we were having in a school by herself, and inquired if her husband could play for the *Challengers."*

"Jeni?"

“Roo’s wife. Roo loves baseball, but I wouldn’t let him play unless he agreed to attend at least two Sunday services a month.”

“Sounds like blackmail.”

“It was. When Roo stepped up to the plate, he entered into a different zone. There was no catcher, no umpire, no baseball game, no coach, not even a pitcher. There was a white ball, and that’s it. He had one thought, hit the ball. He never knew what the count was. When he struck out someone had to tell him. He never paid any attention to me coaching on the third base sideline, giving signals. I gave signals anyway so that the other team thought Roo was complying with me. I could never ask Roo to bunt; he was there to hit the ball, as hard and far as possible. It’s like he was possessed.”

“Possessed?”

“Roo had a dark side in those days. Anyhow, Roo swung at anything that came close to the strike range. He usually got a hit.”

“Then what happened?”

“Well, as I said, he became a Christian. He was no longer so intent. Baseball didn’t matter so much. He was no longer a man obsessed. He never lost his talent, of course, so he is still an excellent hitter. Just not as good as before.”

“A dark side, you say?”

“Because Roo gave a public testimony at our church, I feel free to share that with you.”

“A testimony?”

“Yea, you know, when one tells their story of how they came to Christ.”

“Possessed?”

“Possessed, oppressed.”

“I know someone like that.” Mac knew Tree was referring to himself.

“How are the nightmares?”

“They come visiting most nights. Post-traumatic stress, I’m told. I can see Billy and Jesse and Pete and …… I see their eyes staring their dead stares, their young bodies mangled and bloodied. Don’t you see them, Mac?”

“No.”

“Must be nice.”

“Do you see Sally much?”

"Not since the divorce."

"And the kids? How are they?"

"They're doing okay. Kay-Lyn is fifteen, and Brandon is two years behind her, both getting decent marks in most subjects, behind in others."

Tree stopped talking, and Mac didn't break the silence.

"No, they're not okay," Tree corrected himself. "They both have my sadness. So does Sally. None of us can shake it. Wish we were never sent to Granada."

"We did our bit for our country."

"I know. I know."

"I hurt for you, bud."

"Doesn't help, man."

"I still pray for you, though I admit not as much as I used to."

"I hate God, Mac! I hate Him so much!" It was the pain of losing his family that made Tree flare.

"I know."

"Yet I'm your friend."

"My *best* friend."

"I wouldn't be if you knew some of the names I've called your God."

"Yes I would."

"I don't understand you, man." And after a hesitation, "Now let's get back to the schedule. If by some miracle you and your band of merry Christians make the playoffs, perhaps we can make an adjustment."

"No, that won't be necessary. Our church has already decided to skip Sunday morning service if it coincides with a playoff game."

"They would do that?"

"Yeah."

"Amazing."

saturday, april 7th, 2007, 5:30 p.m.

Kyle and Katie Maclin were both at the door to greet their friends, fellow *MorLord Worship Band* members, who came to celebrate their eighteenth. Eighteen years ago Kyle and Katie's arrival

brought incredible relief to Vivian and Terry Maclin. Reports of the perfectly healthy twins born in *Bryden Falls General* spilled excitement into the community via radio and two local papers. The attention the twins garnered had the surprise effect of swelling the Bible study group, and soon Terry was looking for a building to accommodate them all, and Terry Maclin evolved into Brother Maclin, and then Pastor Maclin and then Pastor Mac. Mac's people shared their joy, fully adapted the twins into their hearts, and felt no compulsion to check their outpouring of awe and attention upon the look-alikes.

John Douglas Tanner was first arrival at the Maclins. John had never been to school a day in his life. Mom was his teacher, Mom his mentor, Mom, more than any other, his influence, and that influence was Godly, unusually so. John's home was his school, the acreage his playground, his four siblings his closest friends. The richness of Jeni's character produced good fruit in her children; in John it fashioned a reverence for God, moral strength, and love for music. Home-schooled mature quickly, being so much in the company of an adult, and John was no exception, having the bearing of one years older. John was an aspiring violinist.

Tanya Borric was second to arrive. Tanya's parents were founding members of the *Center,* going back eighteen years, her dad a board elder. Tanya was a shy, overweight seventeen. Though gifted with a rich voice, she dared not hope to be chosen lead vocalist. Actually, her sole aspiration was to be accepted by her peers.

Todd Anderson was next at the Maclin door. Todd was *not* shy. His father, also an elder, was a success in business, owner of a car dealership. The confidence that helped make him wealthy rubbed off on his son. Todd was an able guitarist and proud owner of a gifted voice. Perhaps, he hoped, he would be chosen lead vocalist; being nineteen, this was his last chance.

Marie Schierling was on keyboard and also played flute. She arrived the same time as Mark Rogers the drummer. Whoever was chosen band captain would have the responsibility of tempering this drummer's enthusiasm that, as of yet, far surpassed his talent.

Karla Morgan, last arrival, didn't play an instrument, and her voice was only acceptable when accompanied by others. Katie suspected her interests were more in her brother than the band.

This year's worship band, which was to have its official beginning in two weeks at their first practice, would be responsible for governing itself, mostly, Assistant Pastor Phil Ferguson a distant overseer. The band members were to select their own band captain who, with the input of the other members, was to make the many required decisions. Kyle, lead guitarist, felt the responsibility to captain the team should fall on him, the pastor's son.

Katie, like Tanya, Todd and Karla, was a vocalist, quite good, but not necessarily the best of the four. Katie would find it more than a little difficult to settle for backup singer. All her life people seemed to do whatever it took to make her smile. Kyle seemed to be born smiling, but Katie often had to be coaxed. Being twins, and being the pastor's kids, they were both the darlings of the church, and

much energy was invested to keep Katie as happy as her twin; one smiling, the other frowning would never do. Katie more than *hoped* her band peers would do what was necessary to make her happy by selecting her lead vocalist, she *expected* it - sort of.

For each of the band members it was a plus to be a guest at the pastor's home. Pastor Mac never had a problem relating with young people. It was a happy, giggling group seated around the Maclin dining room table that Saturday evening devouring Vivian's roasted duck supper. After supper Mac made a special effort to make the Tanner boy feel welcome, talking baseball, fishing and church concerns. Mac had always been impressed with John's maturity and interest in the spiritual. He had the potential to make an excellent pastor some day.

For John, the *Center* was a social halfway house, halfway between his protected life with Mom and Dad and the coming adult life somewhere out there, somewhere else. Of course, the influence of the *Center* was not only social, but spiritual. Socially, there was no conflict between the *Center* and home; however, spiritually there was an inconsistency. It was something John felt rather than understood. He knew the spiritual atmosphere at the church was different than that of home. This puzzled the eighteen year old, and caused not a little tension. It was like the influence of church life was tugging him in one direction, while home influence was tugging in the other. Home was vastly outnumbered, consisting only of Dad and Mom. The *Center* had many to influence - the youth group, band, the baseball team, personal friends, Pastor Phil, Pastor Mac and many others in the four-hundred congregation. And then there was Katie.

No, nothing had ever been spoken between the two, nor had either spoken of it to another, and yet both knew. They were never alone, nor did they want to be, it was too early for that. Kyle knew, being so close to both his twin and closest friend. Vivian suspected. Jeni was certain. Mac was clueless.

There was simply a mutual awareness that John and Katie were each other's choice, something that could go beyond the romantic, even a lifelong partnership. Though knowing each other most of their lives, only recently were they interested in the other. Katie was firmly attached to all that the *Center* was and represented; this added *oomph* to the pull upon John's loyalty to home and parents.

Katie knew no other life. And she prized it. Her father was the hub of a sizeable spiritual community. He was more than unforgotten; he was *gazed upon.* In the entire congregation, her-dad-the-pastor was the only one never ignored or slighted. His presence was always acknowledged, his company envied.

Growing up under mother's wings, she noticed how the ladies became more enthused preparing the potluck meal when her-mom-the-pastor's-wife walked into the kitchen, and how they felt obligated to explain to Vivian all details of the preparation. Katie noticed how their intensity escalated when Mom led in prayer, and how her opinion about various matters was sought, her approval needed.

Katie's husband, she decided, would be a pastor. As a pastor's wife, she would be …… influential? ……

no, beneficial. She was willing to start their own church, if that was required, just like her parents did when they were young. But for now the immediate issue was lead vocalist. Katie understood leverage well, and was confident.

Mac had to leave the celebration early to prepare for tomorrow's message. Before doing so he asked John to drop by the church on his way home. "Blow your horn and I'll come out to the parking lot."

saturday, april 7th, 2007, 7:30 p.m.

Terry Maclin looked forward to these Saturday evening alone times at the church. Quiet, peaceful, no ringing phone, no questions or interferences. Two hours, maybe three. He liked to pace the aisles as he prayed and prepared for Sunday's message, or just let his mind drift here and there and wherever. Lights were off except for the one shining from the pulpit, that one never turned off.

It has been a good day, Mac reckoned. *Good to see Tree again,* though he ached for his friend. *Hadn't lunched with Tree since the end of last season's ball. Can't let that happen. Must make contact at least every two months no matter what shape the roads are in.* And then his mind drifted to baseball.

Baseball practice went well this afternoon. Winter practice will give us a head start. Think we'll do okay this year. Kyle and John will give us a boost. Kyle's got a good arm. We can use help on the mound. My arm ain't what it used to be. And John! Man, that kid can hit! Inherited his dad's barrel-chested physique. Lots of power.

And then an unhappy thought. *Hmmm. Roo!..... Roo gave no hint why he wanted to see me Monday.* Mac was very aware of *the enemy,* never far away, lurking, looking for inroads, eager to disrupt unity. He captained a tight ship, and always tried to foresee a problem before it got here. Ever the watchful shepherd, even a little detail out of place aroused alertness and disrupted his calm. Many in his congregation made appointments, no problem; they needed something he had to offer, advice maybe, or encouragement or just a listening ear. But Roo? Un-unh. Roo was different. Mac and Roo were not ..... *together*. Not like before. Roo had ..... *drifted.* They were no longer on the same page. *Well,* Mac concluded, *Monday's not far away. I'll know soon enough.*

And then his thoughts rolled onto his twins. *Seem to have enjoyed their birthday supper with the band. Good kids, all of them. Katie sure wants to be lead vocalist this year. Real bad. Even took voice lessons. Had to dig deep for that. She is good, but so are a few of the others. Like Tanya Borric and Todd Anderson. Less poise than Katie, but strong voices capable of captivating an audience.* Mac appointed Phil Ferguson to give leadership to the *Center's* teen-age band so there wouldn't be an appearance of favoritism towards his kids. In actuality, however, though neither would admit it, Phil, as assistant pastor, was merely an appendage of Terry Maclin's authority; the potential for partiality was still there, just less apparent.

Now I've got to get ready for tomorrow's message, Mac reprimanded himself.

Walking the aisles in thought and prayer, it was natural for Mac's eyes to keep falling on the light splashing its mild glow from the underside of the pulpit into the large sanctuary. The light shooting upwards from the base was intended to depict the Word going forth. A beautiful pulpit, rich and splendid, the centerpiece of the sanctuary, it had been an essential tool to the building of *Bryden Falls Community Christian Cente*r. From there he rallied the troops and kept the vision alive.

To himself, Mac referred to the pulpit, any pulpit, as *the god-maker*. He knew the power of the pulpit to enlarge - puff up - the one positioned behind it. The ordinary would eventually evolve into God's anointed, his perspective increasingly valued as Sundays rotated. And the gifted orator was ballooned beyond recognition. Man titled the minister "Reverend"; the pulpit gave the title credibility. Mac knew for a fact there was a wide gap between the Christian he was and the Christian he was perceived to be.

Gazing upon the pulpit distracted Mac, and he looked away from tomorrow's service to the first Sunday in June. Superintendent Martin Johnston requested he give the main sermon at the Sunday morning service at the denomination's bi-annual northwest conference. It was a real honor. For years Mac had served as district elder, one of a dozen, and to be chosen keynote speaker was an indication of credibility amongst his peers. Superintendent Johnston hoped Mac's sharing would be a balm of encouragement to those less successful. His Center was started from zilch in an unfamiliar mid-size city, its steady growth could not be traced to a church split in the community, many of the adherents at the Center were a result of Mac's and Vivian's evangelistic efforts through personable encounters.

Mac learned years ago that when he had the title to a message, the message came easy. And Mac knew at that moment, gazing upon the pulpit he long ago chose for the Center, the title of his message to be delivered at the conference: Pulpit Power.

Insights regarding Pulpit Power, started to come. Mac learned long ago to write them down immediately, his memory not to be trusted. And if he would just remember to get his scribbled notes to Vivian, she would dutifully type and file them in the computer for future use. So standing at the pulpit facing the empty church he began to pen his thoughts: *The pulpit can be likened to a weapon that, although in itself amoral, if mishandled, can do much damage to those within its range..... volumes of both Godly insights and false winds of doctrine pour forth from pulpits on any given Sunday..... there has been instances within our own denomination when entire assemblies have been split and broken by errant pastors who forsook denominational doctrine, replacing them with ear-tickling half-truths..... and it's not sufficient to speak truth, truth must come in due season..... truth must come from a gentle spirit, not a spirit harsh and angry..... some use Scripture like a soldier would use a machine gun; instead of spitting out bullets, they spew out verses meant to silence those who dare possess an adverse position..... we are called as servants to offer a healthy diet of God's truths, not to force-feed those we perceive to be in need of our wisdom..... David said of the Lord, "Your gentleness has made me great."*

Mac's thoughts were disrupted by a horn outside. *Who can that be at this hour? Oh yes*, Mac remembered, *that's John Tanner. Told him to drop by on his way home from the dinner party.* But he dared not stop writing; inspiration chooses its own moments. "Hang on, John!" he said, breaking the silence of the sanctuary. "Hang on!"

The pulpit can be - no, the pulpit most often is - a corrupter to the naive speaker..... if you use your impressionable congregation as a mirror, your self-image will be seriously distorted..... that distorted mirror will make you appear to be bigger, wiser and holier than you are..... pride will set in, and in time you will destroy yourself and the congregation you have agreed to protect.

"Hang on, John, hang on!" Faster he wrote: *Most of us are simply incapable of the attention and adulation the pulpit affords..... though most would deny it, or never realize it, everyone wants to reach, to touch, to associate with the man in the pulpit..... they covet your company much more than you theirs, and that can be dangerous..... what the stage and bright lights do to the rock star, so the pulpit does to the pupiteer..... if you do not approach the pulpit with humility and a healthy fear of the Lord I would suggest that you do not approach it at all.*

"Okay John, I'm coming!" Mac said at the second honk of the horn, heading towards the front entrance. *John Douglas Tanner - such a nice kid,* Mac thought. *Never did see any teen-age rebellion in him. Never ashamed to be seen with his parents. Shy, but he always looked an adult in the eye. Credit his mom Jeni, the intercessor, for that. And Roo is a positive role model, I have to admit. Admit? Did I use that word?*

"John!" Mac said leaning on *Reuben's Plumbing* van.

"Pastor Mac."

"Enjoy the dinner party?"

"I did."

"And now you're heading home."

"Yes, sir."

"Kyle tells me the two of you have been discussing the possibility of attending *Norwestern Seminary* together."

"I've been thinking about it. I know Kyle is set to go."

"Yes, he is. He certainly has our blessing. Now I want to run something by you. As you may know, in June we are holding our conference. We have it every two years, at various locations. This year we have decided to invite anyone who shows potential for the ministry. We will be needing replacements for those soon retiring, and we want to challenge others to pioneer churches, just as I did several years ago. Head office has agreed to cover all meals and a hotel room for the guests. All

you have to do is come up with the airfare. No obligations or expectations will be placed on you. What do you think?"

"Wow!" was all John could say.

"So pray about it, and let me know as soon as possible. I would never have asked you if I didn't see a real potential for ministry. I have watched you grow up since you were not much higher than my knees. Your zeal for God is uncommon, especially for your age. I respect you as a person, and am privileged to know you."

The pastor's words moistened the teen-ager's eyes. "Thanks, Pastor."

And I would like you to marry my Katie some day. We could go fishing together, barbecue Saturday afternoons, do some fishing, take my grandkids to the park.....

"Of course, you must have your parents' consent."

"No problem.....don't think." John didn't respond to Mac's curious look.

"So drive home safely. See you tomorrow morning."

"Will do."

"Love you, John."

"Love you, Pastor Mac."

Hmmm. Surely Roo wouldn't object to his son going to the conference. Or entering the ministry. Would he?

monday, january 12th, 1990, 3:00 p.m.

Jeni Tanner enjoyed chopping the tamarack into kindling which she stacked in piles under the protection of the open-ended shed. Baby John Douglas having his afternoon nap, the housework accomplished, she liked spending these afternoon hours doing her outdoor chores. Having been raised on a farm, Jeni long ago reckoned the benefits of isolation surpassed the drawbacks, and very much loved their ranch-in-the–making. Occasionally she was able to capture the euphoria coming through nature's sights and sounds on her painting canvass. Sounds were crisp and articulate here - the chop of her ax, the scolding chipmunks, the moody winds, Shep's intermittent barking at some imaginary enemy off in the distance, the crunch of snow under her boots, her footsteps on the porch. The snow added to the charm of her treed world, making it a splendor of white.

She was accustomed to work, and there was much to be done. The electrical power lines had not yet reached their property, and they couldn't afford the cost of bringing it in. It would come in time, as others moved into the area, but for now they were roughing it. Both she and Reuben agreed - no generator. No ugly noise intruding the serenity of their dream home and property. The chipmunks

would not appreciate that, nor the quail that fed on the crumbs of Jeni's homemade bread, nor the deer that occasionally dared come within view of their log house. No, it was not the work or the isolation that dampened her soul.

Jeni relished the hours her husband was away on a job, trying to build his business in a town that seemed to have too many plumbers, though his absence added to her solitude. She was but twenty-three years, much too young to be burdened by the sadness that settled obtrusively into her spirit, a spirit uncommonly sensitive and susceptible. Her marriage started off well. She was happy to leave Reuben's parents in the north country, to get away from her father-in-law's endemic cynicism and her mother-in-law's ensuing subservience. Reuben was different from his dad, mellow and unassuming, carefully weighing a matter before speaking, and she was confident he would always be sensitive to her vulnerable spirit. On that basis she answered, "Yes, Reuben, I will gladly be your wife."

It began when they were building their log home that, combined with the pressure of starting a new business and an earlier-than-planned pregnancy, was a load too heavy for the young plumber. Until then he managed to fend off the hideous spirit that long ago attached itself to his father's soul, but now life's pressures opened a breach.

Though a thousand miles apart, Reuben Tanner senior and Reuben Tanner junior were constantly in contact over the phone, more than any other time in their lives. Reuben was strong and gifted with a knack to get the job done, but the young man lacked the knowledge to build his log home and ranch, and about starting and running a business. But his father, an able contractor, had all the answers.

It was his father who told him how to get a phone, so necessary for his out-of-home plumbing business, to his secluded house. On his instructions Reuben ran an electrical wire from the closest neighbor bordering his property, a full half-mile to his own house, stringing the wire along fences, burying it under roadways, covering it with brush and branches, and just laying it on the open ground though trees and foliage. The neighbor balked at Reuben's suggestion that he order a second telephone line in his own name until Reuben said that he would take care of all of his plumbing repairs, plus pay the entire monthly telephone bill. The telephone company never knew of their arrangement, the neighbor was happy, and the Tanners had their contact with the outside world.

Many evenings were spent with Dad on the phone getting instructions for construction - how to set the footings, square the walls, build the massive fireplace, shingle the roof, etc., etc. Unfortunately, that's not all the son absorbed from Dad.

Reuben had no choice but to listen to his father's ceaseless ranting and boasting and expletives always accompanying his advice and instructions. Many hours every week for many months the cynicism poured into Reuben's ears unabatedly, and eventually what entered his ears leaked out of his mouth, at first in little dribbles, but eventually the leak became a river equal to his father's. Jeni

was devastated. It was as if her father-in-law came bursting through the door of their sacred marriage, an unwelcome intruder who would never leave.

Reuben picked up his father's pet expression: *son-of-a-bitch.* Anything that got in his way, anything that irked him, anyone who crossed his path, male or female, was a son-of-a-bitch. If the adversaries were plural, they were *sons-o'-bitches.* Jeni could count on at least a dozen such expletives any Saturday or Sunday when Reuben was home, and half that many after a day's work, each one pricking her gentle spirit. She feared Reuben's newfound scorn and sarcasm would drive her mad. She could envision herself her mother-in-law's clone in just a few years - withdrawn and cowering, never voicing an opinion or conviction. And in twenty years her precious John would be filling his own home with the same spew. And what about the child in her womb?

Jeni wanted to run. She contrived a plan. She would leave a note, drive to town as soon as Reuben left for work, catch a bus, head east, find a job as a waitress until able to make a living selling her pictures. But how could she take his son from him? How could she abandon the one she committed herself to in marriage? But did she really have a choice?

saturday, april 7th, 2007, 9:00 p.m.

Arms outstretched and leaning against the pulpit, Mac had to admit again what he long ago concluded: he loved the pulpit. He loved the pulpit because he loved to be heard.

Mac could not remember as a child or a teen-ager anyone seriously wanting to listen to him. The fifth of six children, he was seldom the center of attention of parents always in the midst of a myriad of responsibilities. He was patiently given opportunity to express his needs, but not youthful thoughts and observations. There was never an occasion when someone looked him in the eye and said, "What do you have to say? What do you believe? What is inside you?"

Everyone wants to be heard. An attentive audience, even an audience of one, is the secret longing of most, even the shy. Isn't there someone out there who will listen to me, I mean really listen? the heart cries. I have opinions to express, emotions to vent, dreams to share, wisdom to freely give. Is there no one to hear? Is there not one in need of my rich counsel? Often when two converse neither are listening with intensity, both more wanting to express than to hear. When you see that blank stare you know connection has been lost, even though the other may be nodding in agreement. No one likes to be ignored, yet most are mostly.

Mac harbored the nasty suspicion that many who gained control of the pulpit were those who had the greater need, undoubtedly an unconscious need, to be heard - and this they mistook for a calling of God to preach His Word and shepherd His sheep! There I go again, Mac scolded himself. Mac was an incurable studier-of-persons. Should have been a psychoanalyst, he kidded himself. Unlike most psychoanalysts, however, Mac realized the flawed condition of man's mind and heart

was a result of sin - Adam's, etc. And he had little delusion about his own heart and motives. He acknowledged many faults, but knew God had a particular distaste for hypocrisy, and though far from transparent he was determined to always be honest and open before at least two persons, himself and God. He would occasionally confess, in general terms, his shortcomings before the congregation. But never specifics. Boy, would they be shocked, Mac chuckled. They think our marriage is great. Okay, yes; better than average, maybe; great, no. His honest heart made him admit that the motive to curb marital spats and outbursts of anger was not a mutual love for God, or a love and respect for each other, though certainly these attributes were there, but rather the reality that his repute as an altogether pastor cannot be compromised. Undercurrents of tension caused by marital power struggles, which has plagued the last ten years or so of marriage, must never surface.

And they think I have an uncommon moral fiber. Wrong. They should have seen me trying to fit the screens into the upstairs windows last Friday. About an inch away from a full-blown temper tantrum. Had to get out of there before I lost it. The screens are still not in, an unhappy thought.

More than anything, it was the pulpit that cultivated this unrealistic image of a holy, at least holier-than-most, man of God. Sure, he truly loved his people, cared for them, hurt with them, and wanted very much to bless them with the Word of God. But his motives for pulpit ministry were a mixture of good and far from good, a desire to bless and a want to be influential. Every Sunday morning he had an audience waiting for him to expound his spirituals wares. Certainly their concentration slipped in and out, but at any given moment many were fully focused on his message - and him. It made him feel thoroughly wanted and important. Who doesn't want to be significant? His forty-five minute sermon was his week's climax, almost as cherished as his salary.

Honesty before God, Mac long ago concluded, helped protect him from the snares so many others fell into. How easy to slip from humility to pride, from leader to controller, from teacher to verbal tyrant, from servant to king.

Mac rarely shared the pulpit with anyone, and no one ever complained. Mac had always been amazed at peoples' readiness to accept unwritten, unspoken rules, even unreasonable ones. Everyone simply accepted he alone was commissioned by God to preach from the pulpit, though he had never voiced such a thought. He knew Vivian itched to preach although she would never ask, asking a trespass against one of the unwritten rules. Vivian graduated from the same Bible school, her ability to communicate quite adequate, doctrinally they were on the same page; but though the pastor's wife she was still laity, and Mac had no intention of opening that door. Secretly, he was well pleased with the denomination's policy not to license women, though he was not sure he agreed. The last thing he wanted was a husband-wife pastoral team. For Vivian, the policy was, "an outdated, male-supremacy convenience." Nonetheless, she accepted that painful convenience, accepting something a dutiful pastor's wife does.

Now Phil Ferguson is a different story. Not yet ordained, but licensed and part-time staff as of three

months ago, Phil expected eventual access to the pulpit. And Mac knew he must concede. Mac remembered his one and only stint as assistant pastor when a few years younger than Phil. The only time the pastor released his pulpit to him was when he had a firm grip on another, a speaking engagement in another church service or conference or whatever. Mac put up with that for a year and resigned, determined never to be anyone's add-on again.

The official story is that Terry and Vivian Maclin felt the call of God to pioneer a church in Canada. But that was the distorted version. The real story is that the pastor insisted that Terry agree not to start a church in that city or region for two years minimum. He had become quite popular in the congregation with young and old, and the fear was that some would leave the church for his. An official from head office was brought in to reinforce the pastor's demand. "How about Canada?" Mac asked. "Canada? Well, yes." So Terry and Vivian moved to Bryden Falls, north of the border, still reasonably close to both their families and friends.

No, Mac determined, I will not do that to Phil. I will share the pulpit. Ouch!

Mac found himself packing his books and notes earlier than usual. He hadn't yet been there two hours, but was feeling uncomfortable about something. Something in the air. What is it? And then he recalled Vivian's words, "The men working on the floor in the sanctuary should be finished late afternoon." That's it. The floorers just finished installing the new carpet. That's what's in the air..... fibers from the carpet. Must come early tomorrow and air this place out. Mac made a quick inspection of the new red carpet, and was satisfied with the workmanship. Mmmm. This is the second time this carpet has been replaced. And out the front door he went.

monday, april 9th, 2007, 12:55 p.m.

"Good afternoon, Reuben." Vivian was cordial.

"Hello, Vivian." It had been years since they had occasion to speak to each other.

"Terry will be right with you. He's been having a busy day." Pushing an intercom button, "Reuben Tanner here to see you."

"How are Jeni and the children?"

"Blessed. Our God is good."

"Well, yes, of course," Vivian agreed just as Mac came out of his office into the reception area.

"Roo!" Mac gave his back catcher a bear hug.

"Mac!"

Mac? Not pastor Mac? Vivian didn't like that; slighting the husband is slighting the wife.

Nor did Mac. *Mac. Not* Pastor *Mac. The only one in the congregation who doesn't call me Pastor. We*

will have to talk about that one day .“Come in! Come in! Have a seat. No sit here,” and he rolled his sizable leather seat from behind his desk, pulling up a chair for himself.

And then they went through the preliminaries: *How's Jeni?..... Jeni is doing fine..... Good to hear. And the children?..... Stretching up. Everyone's healthy. And the twins?..... Busy. Both finishing their one-year business course. And there's youth and band..... John, too. And now ball is starting up..... Yeah. We can sure use new blood. Have you noticed we are not getting any younger, Roo?..... First game on Thursday..... Right, my friend Tree's team..... They'll be the team to beat, Mac..... Do you think practice went okay on Saturday?..... Great. It was good to get together with the team again. The diamond is mostly dried out from the winter..... Sweet. I think our winter practices in the gym will pay dividends..... Yeah, it will give us a head start..... Be nice to make the playoffs this year, real nice..... Sweet. We could have made it last year but they always save their best pitchers for us..... Yeah, they hate losing to a Canadian team. And they really hate losing to a church team..... The upside is we improve because we play their best..... Good point..... This year we have a good chance. We have John and Kyle and Phil Ferguson this year. Maybe Phil can help me behind the plate..... I don't know, Roo. Not many want to be back catcher. And you're the best..... Thanks. We will have to work on our signals. Some of the teams are good at decoding..... I know. By the way, how's business?..... Business is good..... Lots of work?..... As much as I want. I have no desire to be wealthy..... You are wealthy, Roo..... I hear you.....*

Mac used small talk to relieve the tension often accompanying his guests, and it always worked, though never fully. Visiting a pastor in the pastor's office is not easy for most, and he sensed Roo was no exception. Eventually Mac got down to business. “So what brings you here, my friend? I must say, I have been curious.”

“I have a request I want you to prayerfully consider, Mac.”

Mac, again. “What is it, Roo? You have been a blessing to me and to this church for many years. How can I help you?”

“First I must share where I am coming from.”

“Love to hear it.”

“I have had an unusual hunger for the Lord the past five or six years. I have set aside Fridays, and lately Mondays, for prayer and studying the Bible.”

“I've never heard of such a thing. Must be nice.”

“It is. And it's also been painful. He has shown me many things about myself. You know, my heart, my motives, my life.”

“I am listening, Roo.” Mac was beginning to relax about the purpose of Roo's visit. *Obviously, he simply wants to share his heart, probably have me pray with him.*

“He also has been speaking to me about our congregation.”

"Oh?" Mac didn't like this. *Hard to believe God would speak to one of the sheep about the flock. Always thought he would speak to the one responsible, the shepherd - me.*

"I believe I have a message for the congregation."

"Oh?"

"I request access to the pulpit. I will need two successive Sundays to deliver the word I believe the Lord would have me give."

"I beg your pardon," Mac responded in disbelief, not sure he heard correctly.

CHAPTER TWO

thursday, april 12th, 2007, 5:30. p.m.

Trevor Kenny - Tree - drove into *Bryden Falls Baseball Park* after the hour trip from River's Bend, south of the border, with three of his teammates, parking his '02 F150 crew cab away from the diamond to protect his windshield from foul balls. He liked coming to this park. It was usually an easy win, but that's not it. He liked to strike out Christians.

Tree hated God. God was someone a way up there who got a buzz from watching little earthlings, same as people who like staring at creatures in the zoo. Same as those who followed ambulances hoping to see a good accident, maybe a kid lying injured beside his bike. God is the One who could give a guy a break, but wouldn't. Tree knew people like that. Passed the guy broken down on the side of the winter road, wife and kids freezing in the car. No business of mine. No one to coach midget baseball? Gee, that's too bad.

God stood by and watched - just watched! - Billy and Jesse get gunned down with an AK-47 one month - one month! - before their time in the marines was up. Billy was engaged to be married. His girl was home making wedding plans. Ended up marrying a jerk. And it got better! Here comes Pete and Greg to their rescue. God must have thought, *This is getting good! Are they going to set off that booby trap and blow themselves up?* Boom! Gone. Blown to pieces.

Better shut up, Tree scolded himself, knowing thoughts like these could set off dreaded flashbacks.

Tree got a real bang out of striking out Christians because they loved the One he hated, just like he enjoyed harassing "God-lovers" at work. Being a foreman at the glass plant gave him leverage; if they came in late or made a mistake they suffered his bias. Call it revenge.

He liked to beat the *Challengers* bad, and the *Grizzlies* he coached always managed. Today would be no exception though wins were getting more difficult. The *Grizzlies* were named after the ferocious grizzly bear occasionally spotted in the region's high-up country. They were also called less endearing names behind their backs. They were a rugged bunch taking pride in their coarse mannerism and appearance. Spike, Tree's assistant coach, was so nicknamed because of his

tendency to spike the opposition with his cleats when they dared get in his way. Belch, first baseman, belched noisily whenever he figured the ump made a bad call. Pig was named after the pigs on his rundown pig farm. Or was it because of the beer stains dirtying his rusty-red sweater, and the beer belly testing his shirt buttons? Most on the team needed a shave, and some a bath. It took someone as tough as Tree to manage this horde; the ex-marine could stare down any one of them.

Warm-up over, infield practice done, team's batting orders exchanged, time to get to work. Half of the first inning over, the *Grizzlies* already got two runs off Mac's pitching. *Thought Mac said they practiced all winter,* Tree was thinking as he approached the mound. *Didn't seem to do them much good.*

"Leadoff batter, number 33, left fielder, Kyle Maclin!" the announcer declared on the sound system.

Mac's boy. Don't like this, Tree thought. Mac was his only friend. Yeah, lots of beer buddies, but only one he called friend. *I'll go easy on this one.* He pitched three times in the same place, right down the middle, fast but not too fast. Sure enough, Kyle connected, a high fly ball into the right fielder's glove. *No harm done.* He glanced over to the *Challengers* dugout to see if Mac noticed his act of mercy.

"Second batter, number 8, first baseman and assistant coach, Phil Ferguson!"

Where does Mac pick up these guys? "God keeps sending us baseball players," Tree remembered Mac saying. *Well, mercy time over, pal.* Tree was exceptionally tall and over the years learned to put all six-foot-six to his advantage, using his body as a long sling, often whipping out eighty miles-per-hour pitches, enough to scare most in this league. He expertly mixed fastballs with curves and change-ups and sinkers. The fact he was a lefty gave him a real advantage; most were used to hitting right-handers. Some had thought he had a good chance at pro ball after the marines, but serious beer drinking got in the way.

The change-up completely fooled Phil who nervously anticipated a fastball, and all he hit was air. Embarrassed, he let the next one go by, hoping it would be a ball. It wasn't, strike two. Tree knew Phil would swing at the next one, hoping to redeem himself, so he threw a ball outside. Phil swung and missed. *Have a seat, Pastor Ferguson,* Tree muttered to himself. *Two out, one to go. Who's the next victim?*

"Third man to bat, number 16, short stop, John Tanner!"

Roo's boy. I'll show him what it's like to play with the big boys. John's timing was right on, but missed Tree's fastball by a few inches. The sinker never fooled him, and John let it fall to the ground. Tree purposely pitched outside, thinking the boy would chase it. John let it go, a strike and two balls. *Mmmm, this kid's smart. How about a fastball just above the knees?* John fouled it, two balls and two strikes. John took a chance, letting the next ball go by, thinking his opponent would throw one just outside the strike zone. He was right, a full count.

It's hard hitting a ball when you don't know if it's going to come a eighty miles-per-hour or sixty. Pitcher and batter try to outwit each other. Experience was on Tree's side; he could read John's expectation better than John could read the pitcher's intention. The change-up fooled John, and he swung and missed, the ball landing in the dirt at his feet. Fortunately, the catcher missed the ball as it bounced crazily away from his awaiting glove, and John, allowed to run because the catcher missed the third-strike ball, made it safe to first base. *The kid got a break!*

"Next batter, number 21, back catcher, Reuben, Roo, Tanner!" "Roo! Roo! Roo!" The *Challengers* fans always chanted when Roo came to bat. Many times a hit to the outfield, or occasionally over the fence, won them the game. No one in the league could match his reliability. He was their man, and they loved him.

Best hitter in the league, Tree reminded himself. *Last year hit an incredible four-ninety average.* Tree had faced this worthy opponent many times and was wary. Common sense told Tree that he should purposely walk Roo, figuring he could easily strike the next batter out, putting an end to the inning. Since he didn't intend to let Roo hit, Tree thought it a good opportunity to make a statement.

Reuben had an aggravating habit of crowding the plate. Often the umpire would mistakenly call an inside strike a ball simply because it came so close to the batter. Tree wanted to give Roo the message that he would not tolerate it this year. He purposely aimed for Roo's wrists, but not so fast that Reuben couldn't avoid the ball. It was his way of saying, *Step back!* But Roo held his ground. *Damn!* Tree mumbled. *So Roo wants to do battle. Okay buddy, you're on.* Tree threw his hardest pitch, just inside the plate, Reuben had to jerk back to avoid the missile. Still Roo ignored this second warning, stepped up to his original position, his body touching the strike zone. *Damn Christians,* Tree thought to himself. Tree could not back down now. The next pitch would be straight at Roo's head.

Pitcher and hitter understood each other perfectly. Roo knew Tree was telling him to move back, and Tree knew he knew. It was a game within the game, a test of the will. Roo realized Tree would not back down. And he knew his fastball could do serious injury. Mac, watching from the third base coach's box, was fully aware of the battle between his best friend and his back catcher. And everyone on both teams and anyone in the stands who had even a little baseball savvy picked up the drama. John watched his dad helplessly from first base. Tree knew that many players on other teams would charge the pitcher's mound in rage if they thought the pitcher would intentionally injure them. He also knew Mac strictly forbade any unsportsmanlike conduct.

Roo fended off the fastball with his bare hand, it hurt bad, the umpire called time-out, inspected the injured hand, sent the batter to first base, walked to the pitcher's mound, gave Tree a stern warning, and angrily shouted, "Play ball!" Tree struck the next batter out, ending the inning.

Tree felt like a real jerk, hitting someone he knew would not hit back. But he was not going to be bested by a Christian. He threw his glove hard on the bench, hoping his team would think he was mad at the *Challengers,* and not himself. He sat in the corner of the dugout and brooded. *Any other*

team would get even, but not these clowns. Tree was thoroughly revolted by their sportsmanship. There was an unwritten rule that Mac, the *Challengers* pitcher, was to purposely hit the first one up to bat to even the score, but Mac would never do that, and everyone knew it. Tree learned from his pal that the *Challengers* were here as an outreach into the community, to be an influence for God, to set an example of Christian behavior. *How disgusting,* Tree thought. *Should never have let them into the league. They don't belong. They're so.....different. No swearing, no dirty jokes, no beer after the game. They don't even get mad when they're supposed to.*

Tree well remembered Mac approaching him about getting into the league.

tuesday, january 7th, 2002, 10:00 a.m.

"What! A *church* team? A *Canadian* church team? You've got to be kidding!"

"Ain't kidding, my friend. We've got some good ball players, and nobody to play. The mountains isolate Bryden Falls from other Canadian cities and towns." Mac could see Tree was not at all impressed, so he said, "So we thought we would come south of the border. The competition may not be as good, but at least it's much closer."

"The competition not so good!? Baseball is *our* sport! We are the best in the world."

"Hey, you're forgetting I'm an American too."

"Half American."

"Just because I'm a dual citizen doesn't make me half American."

"Not sure what it makes you," Tree conceded.

"And there are a few other Americans at the *Center* who play a pretty good game."

"Well, I guess I can't refuse my American brothers. Or my half-brother. Okay, you're in. But there will be conditions."

"Conditions?"
"Yea. Like no prosteli.....what do you call it?"

"You mean proselytizing."

"That's it. None of that stuff. No handing out religious literature. And nothing free. Sell your hamburgers and hot dogs and junk food like everybody else."

"Is that it?"

Tree thought it time to lighten up. "Be nice if you people weren't so.....content. You know, leave your Christian smiles at home. Be miserable like us heathens."

monday, february 5th, 1990, 9:30 a.m.

This was the fourth time Jeni stopped to talk to the pair of Jehovah's Witness ladies who always stood under the store awning marked *Harvest Time Bakery.* Over the months she was attracted to their smiles and warm *good mornings.* Were it not for the hurt from her husband's uninterrupted cynicism she would never have stopped to talk, or accepted their literature. Now she was desperate for any solution, even a spiritual one. Jeni believed in God, and seemed to occasionally sense His presence. She read their material and returned to the same spot, baby John Douglas in her arms, again and again and still again, drawn by their friendly manner and seemingly legitimate concern for her well-being. She accepted their suggestion they bring a ministerial servant for a home visit to further explain their organization and beliefs. The only thing hindering them was the snow. *The first sign of spring,* they promised. *Yes, we will be sure to come when your husband is at work.*

Jeni was sure she allowed plenty of space between herself and the car ahead as she was pulling away from the curb and the friendly ladies, and could not understand how she clipped the fender with the front bumper of her pickup. She flushed with embarrassment as she inspected the damage; the tailgate light of the car was smashed. Suddenly a young lady, slender and smartly dressed, appeared offering her hand. "My name is Vivian Maclin, and I am pleased to meet you."

"Is this your car?! I am so sorry!" and meekly shook her hand.

"Yes, this is my car. But please don't be upset. I have seen you and the little one - he really is so cute - in *Marlin's Marketplace* a few times, and really am pleased to meet you. Please, could we go into the coffee shop - there's one in this bakery - and exchange phone numbers, or whatever people do when there's an accident."

"Well, yes. I will back up and we - my baby and I - will be right in."

When Jeni and baby John entered the bakery there was a coffee waiting for her. "You do drink coffee?"

"Yes. Thank you. I am so sorry about your car. I will cover the cost of repair, and also extra for the trouble. I feel so clumsy. I thought I allowed sufficient space between our vehicles."

"You know," Vivian replied, "it's no big deal. My husband has connections. I mean, there are people in our church who can fix the problem. My husband is the pastor, you see. He is always coming to peoples' rescue and they come to ours. Anyway, let's start all over. My name is Vivian Maclin."

"My name is Jeni Tanner. This is my son, John Douglas. He will be a year old in a few weeks."

"My twins will be a year old in a couple of months." There was no hint in Vivian Maclin's physique that seven months ago she was pregnant with two.

"You're the lady with the twins? Now I remember! I saw their pictures in the paper. They are beautiful."

"Kyle and Katie. Terry - that's my husband - looks after them Monday mornings. I appreciate the

break. Does your husband work in town?"

"My husband owns a plumbing business, a one-man business, *Reuben's Plumbing."*

"Oh! Does he own a blue van? It seems to me I've seen that name on a van."

"Yes, that's the one. We moved into town about three years ago. We live just north of here on some acreage."

"Sounds real nice."

"Actually, it is."

"I noticed you were talking to those ladies outside. Are you a Jehovah's Witness?"

Jeni thought she saw a look of relief when she answered no. "Reuben and I are both Catholic. Sort of. We were married in a Catholic church, but we aren't really anything. The ladies were kind enough to give me their literature. I guess I am interested in that sort of thing. They offered to come see me when the snow melts, and bring a ministerial servant, whatever that is."

Vivian wisely changed the subject. "Tell me, have you made many friends in Bryden Falls?"

"No. No, we haven't. We don't have neighbors close by. We both left our families after we were married. We spent the first year building our log house, and Reuben's been busy trying to establish himself."

"I would like to offer you our friendship. We also moved to Bryden Falls recently. Perhaps our husbands could meet. Perhaps the four of us could get together."

"I cannot speak for my husband, but I accept your offer of friendship. You seem to be a very kind person. I smashed the tailgate light of your car, and you invite me for a coffee."

"I am a Christian, Jeni. I met Terry in Bible College and we married soon after. We moved to Bryden Falls because we wanted to be a blessing to the people, to demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ whenever we had opportunity. We started with a Bible study in our home, and now we meet at *Bryden Elementary School.* Perhaps you and Reuben would like to join us."

"No. Reuben does not share my interest - perhaps a better word is curiosity - in religion. And I don't think he would appreciate me driving the winter roads more than what is necessary."

"Perhaps Terry and I could come to visit."

"Do you have a four-wheel drive? The roads can be scary."

"We can borrow one. Like I said, my husband has connections."

They chatted freely for a half an hour or so, the initial bonding of friendship, and agreed Wednesday morning would be a good time for the Maclins to come to the ranch.

"Tell me, Vivian. Should I write you a check now to cover the damage or wait to hear from you?"

"You know, I really don't think it's as serious as it looks. Terry will look after it. Please, just forget about it."

"No! No!"

"Really. Let's call it a token of friendship."

thursday, april 12th, 2007, 6:15 p.m.

Tree sat despondent in the dugout, pulling at his mustache, waiting his turn to bat. *Maybe it was a mistake letting these guys in.* This was not the first time he thought the thought.

Generally, Tree was pleased with his decision to let the *Challengers* in the American men's league. Every baseball player likes to play before a large crowd, and the *Challengers* always provided one. The *Grizzlies* drew maybe forty people for a home game, and that was average for the other teams as well. The *Challengers* drew two hundred and fifty. When playing on the road they often outnumbered the home team fans, traveling into the States in a rented bus or in vans. Looking into the stands, Tree could see that today, the first game of the season, an April chill in the air, was no exception. With their ticket sales the *Challengers* brought more money into the league than any other. And Tree had to admit, it was more than that. He liked the change of being around people who didn't complain so much, who weren't so critical and unhappy. No, he wouldn't want to be part of that crowd, but it was okay for a couple of hours.

Tree realized his hard feelings against God lessened in the company of these people, and he didn't like that. Hate and beer had long ago become his pastime and friends. Mac dampened his hate more than anyone, but he long ago decided Mac's friendship was worth it.

And Roo! What's with that guy? Couldn't he have rushed the mound? At the very least stared me down? When it's my turn at bat he will say, Hi, Trevor, *like nothing happened.* "Roo had a dark side," Tree remembered Mac saying. *Mmmm. Would like to have known him then. We could have been buds. Gotta admit, the boy's got guts. Not many wouldn't back up for me when I wanted them off the plate.*

"Next batter for the *Grizzlies,* number four, pitcher and team coach, Trevor, Tree, Kenny!" *Here we go again. Another strike out,* Tree said to himself walking to the mound. A great pitcher, but by his own admission, "lousy at bats," a dismal 220 average. *A runner on first base, one out, a hit would be nice.*

"Hi, Trevor." Roo greeted everyone the same, having memorized names and uniform numbers.

"Roo." *What else can I say?* Tree thought. *How you doing, Roo? How's your hand, Roo? Sorry I was a jerk, Roo?* He really wanted to say, *Tell me about your dark days, Roo. You know, the days when you were a real jerk, like me. How did you get out of it?*

Tree was embarrassed facing his friend Mac on the pitcher's mound. Injuring one of his people was

like hurting Mac himself. And nothing was gained from it. *Well, it's a man's game, pal.* Being so tall, Tree offered the pitcher a huge strike zone. It was hard to get a walk, and he never did learn to master the bat.

Feel funny up here, Tree said to himself. *How do you hit against the guy who saved your life?* And his thoughts involuntarily went back twenty years. *Oh no!* Tree knew he made a serious mistake, letting his mind wander into forbidden territory, but it was too late. Combined with the conflict he had with Roo and the guilt of purposely injuring one of Mac's people, the thought of Mac saving his life twenty years ago opened the door, and in rushed the hated flashbacks.

Ratatatat. Ratatatat. Ratatatat.

The AK-47 machine guns were all around them. His squad had walked into an ambush, marines were falling.

"Tree! Where are you? Tree!"

"Over here, Mac. I'm hit bad! Right leg, arm and shoulder. A bomb." The rest of Tree's body was protected by a tree.

"Billy and Jesse are down! Can you get to them?" Tree shouted over the deafening madness.

"Dead. Both of them," Mac shouted back. "Billy took a bullet in the neck. Jesse got his guts blown out!"

Tree's bulky mustache collected most of the sweat pouring from his forehead and face. Staring stupidly at the pitcher's mound, Tree backed out of the batters box. He banged his cleats with his bat as if to clear them of mud. He retied his shoes.

Ratatatat. Ratatatat. Ratatatat.

"Play ball!" The man in blue was getting impatient.

"Hang on, Tree! I'm coming!"

"No, don't! There's too many! Pete and Greg are blown to pieces! A booby trap. Same one that got me. Run for it, Mac! See you in hell!"

"Ball one!"

Mac could see his friend was in trouble and took his time, rubbing the baseball in his hands, hoping the flashbacks would soon pass. Roo also knew something was wrong. "Hang in there, big guy!" he whispered, signaling for an outside pitch.

Ratatatat. Ratatatat. Ratatatat.

"Leave me, Mac! Run for it!"

"Not a chance!"

The thirty-man platoon had walked into an enemy force that was not supposed to be there, waiting for them, spread out in a horseshoe. The first into the horseshoe was Tree and four of his buds, Mac not far behind. Tree's world suddenly went crazy as the enemy opened fire. Hardened marines fell all around him, screaming like little kids, grenades blowing up the terrain, blood splattering trees and rocks, officers on both sides of the war screaming orders in different languages.

"Two balls, one strike!"

Ratatatat. Ratatatat. Ratatatat.

Mac decided not to walk his friend, putting him on first base, but to strike him out and get him back to the safety of the dugout. Tree barely noticed the baseball flying over the middle of the plate.

The platoon started pulling back, firing their rifles and heaving grenades as they retreated. But Mac, leaving his rifle and ammunition behind, crawled in the opposite direction towards his bud and towards the enemy.

"I've got to stop the bleeding. It's going to hurt."

"Mac, you're crazy!" Tree was ashamed of his broken voice and the tears of pain streaking his young muddied face. They spoke in whispers now, the enemy creeping towards them. "Get out of here, Mac!"

Wounds wrapped, bleeding stopped, Mac rolled Tree towards the hollow made by the bomb that killed their friends and shot shrapnel into Tree's body. The cavity was beside a large tree that hugged a muddy riverbank, exposing its roots.

"What are you doing, Mac?!"

"I'm going to bury you."

"What?"

"It's your only chance. If I try carrying you out we will both be dead in seconds."

"Two balls, two strikes!" Tree backed out of the batter's box again, wiping sweat off his forehead, fighting the demons choking his mind.

Roo was trying to read Mac's intention. What was his plan? Catcher and pitcher developed an uncanny communication over the years that went beyond words and signals. They seemed to be able to read each other's mind. Roo deduced Mac wanted to strike Tree out and get him off the field without embarrassment.

"Hang in there, big guy. Hang in there," Roo whispered so softly even the umpire behind him couldn't distinguish his words. But Tree was thousands of miles away being buried in a smoking pit with dirt

mixed with his friends' blood and body parts.

Mac rolled his bud into the hole in such a way that his head was hidden under the roots allowing him to breathe, but not be seen. Mac quickly shoveled the bloodied dirt with his hands to cover the rest of his body. He could hear enemy soldiers drawing closer.

"Now listen to me!" Mac whispered. "Don't move! They won't see you if you don't move! If you move a muscle you're a dead man. Don't groan, don't cough, don't sneeze!"

"Got it! Now get the hell out of here!"

"I'm not going anywhere, pal. Got it? I'll be right beside you hiding in the river. You won't see me or hear me, but I'll be no more than six feet away. Quiet now, they're coming."

Mac grabbed a pipe that looked like it could be from Pete or Greg's rifle, slid into the murky water of the small river, lay on the river bottom on his back, pulled a heavy rock on his stomach so he wouldn't float to the surface, and used the pipe to breathe air above the water's surface. It was a trick he learned as a kid back home on the farm. He would not surface until dark.

Tree lay motionless and silent. Face pressed sideways in the dirt, he could still see through the roots with one eye camouflaged figures emerging from the dense foliage. The hate for the enemy soldiers who mercilessly put an end to the lives of his friends stifled his fear though they came within a few feet. He wanted to kill them, at least some, but knew he was helpless.

"Strike three! You're out!"

To distract everyone's attention, Roo feigned a pick-off of the runner at first base, intentionally throwing the ball high above Phil Ferguson's glove. Everyone watched as the runner rounded second base heading for third as Phil and the right fielder scrambled for the ball. Only Mac noticed Roo gently taking Tree's bat and directing him to the dugout.

The flashbacks withdrew as quickly as they came. Tree would be okay now. He was grimly aware of what Mac and Roo had done for him, saving him public embarrassment, and he felt more the jerk than before.

The *Grizzlies* won again, 8 to 5. Tree had trouble looking Roo in the eye when the teams lined up to give low fives. *Need a beer,* he thought to himself.

monday, april 16th, 2007, 9:00 a.m.

Terry Maclin felt at home at *Bryden Falls Baseball Park,* both when it was crowded with baseball enthusiasts and when near empty as it now was. Resting in the bleachers after jogging his ten rounds around the park, he counted his blessings. It was good having the *Center* next to the park, not just because it was convenient, but the greenery it provided. Baseball fields of varying sizes and quality always provided a backdrop for his life whether shagging balls for his older brothers, playing

little league, or serious ball for rep teams.

Sitting in the stands, he went over Thursday's loss against the *Grizzlies.* Perhaps it was too much to hope for an upset against the number one team, but he had to admit he just didn't like losing, whether it was baseball, or chess with his son Kyle, or Bible trivia with the family, or horseshoes at a church picnic. He often wondered if his severe competitive spirit was a flaw or strength. His strong will seemed to make him more successful than most.

He went over the conflict between Tree and Roo. Tree was in the wrong, but he hurt for his bud nonetheless. Cursed flashbacks. Tree could not escape his past and his past prevented a tolerable future. He wondered why Roo didn't back up from the plate; why make an issue out of it? Was that turning the other cheek? Was he just plain stubborn? What would he have done? He knew Roo crowded the plate so he could hit outside pitches. When he connected, the ball usually arched over the first baseman's head and curved towards the foul line away from the right fielder; a runner on second, and even first, could score. Mac couldn't decide if Reuben did right or wrong by not backing down to an intimidator.

Baseball wasn't his priority this morning, however. Mac asked Vivian to direct Roo over here when he showed up for his 9:00 a.m. appointment, sure that Roo, like himself, would favor sunshine to a stuffy office.

Never in all his years as pastor has anyone asked for his pulpit. There were times when a traveling minister, usually one endorsed by his denomination, would make it known that he was available for preaching, and Mac would often accommodate; if Mac closed his pulpit to other ministers, they would close theirs to him. But a layman? He could not remember such an occasion. Yes, he had heard of seasoned laymen being given the pulpit if their spiritual maturity and insights were pronounced. But no one actually *asked* for the pulpit. It was out of place. Everyone knows the rules, unwritten though they are.

Am I possessive or protective? Mac asked himself. He knew he hated to pass the pulpit - and the power and influence the pulpit affords - to anyone, except for those occasions when he was invited to another. But that didn't mean he was possessive, he reasoned. He had a shepherd's heart and a shepherd protects. Winds of doctrine come and go, they always have, they always will. And they come most often via the pulpit.

Mac was disturbed by Roo's inference that God *wanted* him to speak a word to the congregation. *In other words, God wants me to surrender the pulpit,* Mac concluded. *Funny, why didn't God tell me? Am I to be intimidated by another man's discernment?*

"Are you saying you received a prophecy?" Mac had asked Roo during their last meeting.

"No."

"A vision?"

"No."

"But you seem so sure that God wants you to preach to the assembly."

"The will of God grows on you," Roo had responded.

The awkward conversation over, Mac promised Roo he would give the matter consideration and give him a call.

"I prefer another appointment rather than a phone call," Roo had replied. "Will a week be sufficient?"

Pushy, Mac said to himself. *I thought* I *was the pastor.*

A week having passed, Mac could see Roo approaching him from the direction of the church.

"Roo!"

"Mac!"

"How's your hand."

"It's sore, but okay."

"In the mood for walking?"

"I would like that."

"Hope my B.O. won't bother you. I've been jogging."

"I'm a plumber, remember?" And they both laughed.

"Thanks for your kindness to my friend, Tree. I know you purposely threw a wild ball to first base to distract everyone's attention."

"Do you think it worked?"

"Seemed to. Even his team didn't seem to notice Tree's predicament. He would be highly embarrassed if they did."

"He's been through tough times in the marines?"

"Real tough. Killing does something to you. And four of our buddies lost their lives in a matter of seconds."

"Rough."

"Yea, rough."

Mac decided to get right into it. "So I gave your request serious consideration."

"I knew you would."

"I've decided no."

"Oh?"

"Please, don't take it personal."

"I won't."

"May I speak freely without hurting your feelings?"

"Certainly, Mac."

"I respect you as a person. I've seen spiritual progress over the years. You certainly seem to be morally strong. People speak highly of you. But I must say, I don't really *know* you. You and I have not been *together* over the last several years. I don't know why that is."

Mac gave Roo a chance to respond. When he didn't, Mac continued. "I have strong reservations about opening the pulpit to the congregation. If I open *that* door, how could I close it? Surely you can see the chaos that could occur. Others would want equal opportunity; on what basis could I deny them?

"And there are other reasons. How do I know if you are doctrinally sound? I am not saying I have reason to believe otherwise; I just don't know. You do not attend Wednesday night Bible study. If you did I would know through group discussions what you believe.

"As pastor of the *Center,* the people look to me for protection," Mac continued. "They respect the fact that I am endorsed. You are not endorsed. Not by the denomination, not by the board of elders, not by myself. I am responsible before God to protect the unity of our church. We are a team, united to do good works. I am not bragging when I say we do more for this community than all other churches combined. Division among ourselves would seriously diminish the positive effect we have here at Bryden Falls. Many would get hurt.

"Now please understand, Reuben. I am not saying I doubt your sincerity, or your discernment, or your doctrine. I respect and appreciate you and your family. I look forward to many years growing together and working together."

And now it was Roo's turn.

"I likewise ask permission to speak freely."

"Certainly."

"I understand your dilemma. Now I want you to understand mine.

"I say again, I believe the Lord wants me to give a message, an important message, to the congregation, *His* congregation. I have searched the New Testament to test what I believe to be a prompting of the Lord, and I find no reason why I should not be heard. I must be obedient. Therefore

I ask that this matter be brought before the board of elders. I understand the board is the final authority of the *Center,* am I correct?"

"Correct." Mac was feeling squeezed. And angry. And insulted. And perplexed.

"Will you bring this matter before the board of elders at the next meeting?"

"Yes. The next meeting is Wednesday, in two days. I will let you know of their decision."

"I will make another appointment soon after that."

"Okay." Mac had trouble maintaining his cool. It was not okay like everything is okay, but more like okay, if that's the way you really want it.

"I'll walk you to the parking lot. I'm going that way, anyhow. Time to hit the shower."

Mac was angry. Trouble can do that when helpless to dodge it.

wednesday, december 23rd, 1983, 3:00 p.m.

Terry Maclin walked abruptly through the door marked, "G.F. Bennett, Doctor of Psychiatry," not bothering to close the door behind him.

"I'm here to see the shrink," he said to the middle-aged, overweight receptionist.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"Yes!"

"Name, please."

"General Terry Maclin."

"Yes, *Corporal* Terry Maclin. Unfortunately Dr. Bennett is away for a few days. A family matter. I could reschedule you, or you may see his temporary replacement, Joshua Morgan."

"Not *Doctor* Morgan? The guy's not even a shrink?"

"Actually, it's *Reverend* Morgan. He's a licensed councilor."

"I need a doctor to sign a release form. I won't get out of the marines until I get a signature."

"Joshua Morgan can sign it for you."

"Well bring him on."

"He will be a few minutes. Please have a chair."

"My appointment is for three p.m. It is now three p.m.," Terry said, pulling a chair immediately in front of the receptionist, straddling the chair turned backwards, leaning his crossed arms on the backrest.

She was not intimidated. Anger was not uncommon in this office, nor distress and hate and sarcasm. "I know you have been through a lot, young man."

"You don't know the half of it, lady." Maclin was annoyed at the receptionist because she was there. Soon his family back in the States would take her place. Friends would taste his sarcasm. The yuck within would not be bound. He would look for an argument, and never back down from anyone. Life lost its value. He was less than half. He had seen too much.

"Joshua Morgan." The voice had a southern drawl, head lots of grey, face unusually kind, handshake surprisingly strong for a man who seemed to top seventy. "Please call me Josh."

"Reverend Josh! How good to meet you! I've been looking forward to this for," and he looked at his watch, "yes, for three minutes now."

"Come into my office, please."

"Sign these papers and I'll be out of here, Rev. You're not a shrink, I don't feel in need of counseling, and I know you must be a busy man."

Looking over the papers, Joshua Morgan replied, "Yes, I am authorized to sign these papers. And I will as soon as you tell me your story."

"My story?"

"Yes, Terry. That's all you have to do. Tell me your story and I'll sign your papers. Deal?"

"Deal."

"Coffee? Cream or sugar?"

"I'm a marine."

"Black it is. Now start from the beginning," Josh said, reading his file through thick-lens glasses. "You're seventeen years of age, a clean-cut kid with a decent brain, at home on the farm. Sounds like a dream. Then you got thoughts of joining the marines. Now you take over."

"Okay, I'll make it quick."

"No, please, take your time. I really *want* to hear your story." Terry saw in the old man something more than indifferent professionalism. Was it interest? Could it be compassion? He felt safe and began to talk. About the duty he felt to do a stint in the armed forces before enjoying privileged adulthood in America. About the pride of being a marine just like two of his brothers. About the friendships he made - Tree and Billy and Jesse, and half a dozen others. About being on the wrong ship at the wrong place at the wrong time, and fighting insurgents on the tiny island of Granada in the Caribbean. About the panic and anguish in a teen-aged rebel fighter stunned by his sniper bullet. About his friend shot in the neck, disbelieving eyes staring into nothingness, and another lying dead,

inner parts hanging out where his belly used to be. About his closest friend, wounded and in serious pain, who he buried to hide from enemy soldiers. About the hate he felt for an enemy so heartless, and love for friends equally so.

“It says here you refused a medal for unusual bravery.”

“I refused to take a medal for saving a friend. I thought it would be an insult to the both of us.”

“Want to tell me about it?” Josh asked while signing Maclin’s release papers.

“Tree took shrapnel in the leg, arm and shoulder. Tree is my closest friend. We are from the same town, River’s Bend, out west, just south of the Canadian border. A booby trap set off a bomb. The bomb killed Pete and Greg immediately, and wounded Tree who was twenty feet away, partly protected by a tree. The platoon started to pull back. I left my weapons, crawled to Tree, stopped the bleeding best I could, and buried him in the cavity made by the bomb. I tucked Tree’s head under the roots of a tree in such a way that he could breathe but not be seen. I hid submerged in a narrow river just a few feet away, breathing through a pipe. I came up when it was dark to find a dog sniffing where Tree was buried, growling like something was wrong. The dog couldn’t smell me because I was covered in river mud. When he came close I grabbed the dog by a hind leg and yanked him into the water, drowning him under the weight of my body, and then I remained submerged for a few more hours. Tree told me the sentries heard the dog’s surprised yelp and came within inches. They whistled for their dog, and went back to their camp only fifty feet away. Tree was within hearing and able to gather intelligence that would prove useful if we could make it back to our unit. I knew I had to get him out of there or I would lose another friend.

“So I pulled him upstream a couple of miles under the cover of dark back to our unit. The intelligence proved useful. We got to their ambush sight before they did, and killed them all. I got a few before taking one bad in my left arm. Three nearly escaped but I went after them, pretending not to hear my sergeant's orders to regroup. The first guy I caught up to was early twenties. After the kill I never slowed down, and was soon exchanging fire with two young teens, yelling at each other in Spanish. Seemed to be brothers. They were too scared to shoot straight and went down easy. The last dropped his gun to his side, hoping for mercy. He looked at my bloodied uniform and then into my eyes, and knew he wasn't going to get any mercy out of me. My arm's damaged but I'm not too excited because it's not my pitching arm, and it's my ticket home. I had enough.”

“Yes, you had enough,” the Christian councilor agreed. “Your papers are signed, and you may go. Or…… you may listen to an old man’s insights.”

“I’m listening…… sir.”

“You have seen things no young man should see. You have experienced the nightmare of combat. You have terminated peoples’ lives, and wounded others. Unfortunately survivors such as yourself are usually scarred for life. You will bring the war home with you; you will not be able to shake it off

for years, perhaps never. Your family and friends have lost the person they knew, and will not understand the person you have become. They will not want to share your grief, and wish you would just get over it. You will make monthly trips to the pharmacist, but your meds will simply make you sleep through your nightmares. In my honest opinion, you have but one hope."

"I'm listening." And he was. Intently. "What is that one hope?"

"Jesus Christ."

Joshua Morgan was a southern preacher of many years who interrupted his retirement to volunteer for the marines as a chaplain and councilor. More than once he was reprimanded for conveying his religious beliefs. More than once he ignored those reprimands and presented Christ as the only hope to psychologically damaged young men about to return to the United States. He presented the gospel message to Terry Maclin that afternoon, beginning at Genesis telling of the fall of man through sin, to various Old Testament promises of a Messiah, the coming of that Messiah through the virgin birth as revealed in the gospels, the payment for man's sins at Calvary, and the promises for all who entrust their lives to Christ.

"I've heard all this before," Terry responded, much subdued. "But this is the first time I listened."

"And?"

"And I hereby make a decision to believe in, to receive, Jesus Christ."

"You do?" Joshua was surprised at Terry's pronounced decision. The most he hoped for from a young man so angry and disillusioned was that he would *consider* the matter of his salvation.

In tears that would not be checked Terry repented of his many sins, and embraced the lordship of Christ. Corporal and councilor hugged each other as the new birth swept over the young man's spirit, and the horrors of war poured out of him in gushes of sobs and loud groans, never to return.

Before leaving the old man's office, Terry inquired, "Did you see my friend, Tree. He had an appointment yesterday morning."

"No, he would have seen Dr. Morgan just before he left to attend to family matters."

"Oh."

wednesday, February 28th, 1990, 9:30a.m.

Sitting in front of her canvass on the porch, Jeni was happy to see the familiar white s.u.v. in the distance. *Here they are again,* she marveled, watching them wind their way over the slippery, makeshift road. *It snowed five inches overnight, yet here they are*. She expected a phone call from the Maclins saying the roads were too slippery to chance, and could they cancel their Wednesday morning visit this week. But they always came, four consecutive Wednesdays now, securing a babysitter and borrowing a four-wheel drive. *Why did they come? Why thoroughly inconvenience*

themselves to befriend me?

She happily turned inside to put the coffee on. Mac loves his coffee, Jeni had learned. Soon the three of them were sitting around the living room fireplace, tamarack and pine crackling, hands outstretched to catch the warmth, talking about the ranch.

"I see Reuben is about to do some fencing." Mac had noticed the pile of five-inch pressure-treated posts and three-inch stringers.

"Yes, he figures six or seven Saturdays when the ground thaws in the spring and he will have the fencing done."

"Is he building a corral?"

"Three corrals, actually. We hope to board horses soon. There is a demand for that, we understand."

"Reuben must be a hard worker," Vivian said.

"He is that." Jeni was wanting, even desperate, to get to where they left off after their last visit.

Their friendship established, Jeni had poured out her troubles to her new friends two Wednesdays back, the first time she spoke of her hurt to anyone, more than a little embarrassed by her intervals of weeping. She trusted them, warmed by the love and respect they showed each other, concluding it was indeed genuine. Vivian once said their love for each other was a natural consequence of their mutual love for Christ. Last Wednesday Jeni was quite candid with Mac and Vivian.

"The Jehovah's Witnesses teach they are God's true spokesman on earth, and the Christian churches are so divided they cannot possible be the people of God they claim to be. I can see for myself several denominations right here in Bryden Falls. Each seems to have its own brand of Christianity. The Jehovah's Witnesses are united. They say this unity gives credibility to their claims."

"I can see you have been reading their literature," Mac responded. "Now let me ask you: what country would you think would be one of the better ones in the world?"

"Canada. Perhaps the U.S."

"Do the people seem to be united, or is there diversity?"

"There is much diversity," Jeni answered.

"Now think of a nation you would least like to live in. Would you say that country is united?"

"Yes. Very. I get your point."

"If I may carry on, Christ did not come to establish an organization by which people may be saved. He gave Himself. No denomination, no church or religion can save anyone. But Christ will save any person who puts his or her trust exclusively in Him."

"I don't doubt your sincerity," Jeni responded. "But can you understand my confusion? So many people reading the same Bible seem to come to different conclusions. The Jehovah's Witnesses I talk to seem to be equally sincere."

"There is a way of knowing the truth," Mac said.

"Anyone? Are you saying anyone can find truth? That's hard to believe."

"Yes, I believe anyone can find truth."

"How?" Jeni wanted to know.

"Ask God for the truth."

"You make it sound simple. Why then doesn't everyone ask for truth and be in agreement? Surely everybody wants truth." Jeni was not being argumentative; she really wanted to know.

"No, that's not so," Mac gently responded. "Many want that which they already believe is the truth to be the truth. Truth will bring change, and people are not willing to accept change. If you embrace the truth of Jesus Christ, your life will change radically."

"I want truth."

"I assure you, if you *sincerely*, and I emphasize the word *sincerely*, ask God for truth He will give it to you."

"Really?" Jeni looked to Vivian for assurance.

"Try it, Jeni." Vivian responded, her tone always soft and caring. "Ask God for the truth about Jesus Christ. We cannot say how long God will take to answer your prayer - maybe a day or a week or a month. But answer He will."

And so, later in the week after some hesitation, Jeni did just that. She simply asked God for truth. Soon afterwards, thoughts came. And insights. For the first time she could see inside the ladies who gave her the Watchtower literature. Talking to them outside the bakery the following Tuesday, yesterday, she discerned they were as hollow as she was. The Maclins were *not* hollow. There was *life* there, undeniable. She recalled Scripture verses Mac and Vivian showed her, and knew - how did she know? - the words were true. "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." She was prepared to entirely place her future on these words of Christ. Truth had come just as the Maclins said it would. But now what?

She was so glad last night's heavy snowfall did not deter her friends. And yes, she was happy to be sitting around the fireplace, sipping coffee, nibbling on homemade cookies, making small talk. But her heart was spilling over with a hopeful anticipation she never before experienced. Mac was telling a funny story about a lady who locked her keys in her car at the church last Sunday when Jeni interrupted, tears streaming down her face.

"I'm sorry..... I don't want to sound rude..... I was afraid you wouldn't come because of the heavy snow..... I want to..... do it..... now!"

"Do what, Jeni?" Vivian and Mac both asked.

"I don't know what!" The Holy Spirit was all over her. "I did what you said," she blurted out. "I asked for truth, and did I get it! I know you are right. About Jesus, I mean. But now I don't know what to do."

"Ask Jesus to forgive you your sins," Vivian replied. "Invite Him into your life. Tell Jesus you want to live for Him. Tell Him....."

Jeni Tanner was born again of the Holy Spirit that Wednesday morning. Her conversion to Christ went deep. Unlike most Christians, she did not fade into and out of lukewarmness as the years, with their assortment of upsets and distractions, rolled by. satan acquired a formidable enemy that day. Jeni was a gentle warrior. No longer would she shy away from her husband's ranting. No longer would she entertain thoughts of escaping. She would not fear him. She determined to confront his sarcasm with the peace of Christ that passes all understanding. When he belched his scorn she would sing praises to her lovely Jesus in her sweet alto voice. Reuben would insist she not attend *Bryden Falls Community Christian Center;* Jeni would go, and invite him to join her.

"Tell Reuben I will be here when the ground thaws to help him with the fencing," was the last thing Mac said just before driving off.

"But..." was all Jeni got a chance to say. *There could be a clash,* she wanted to warn Mac. She knew Reuben would be furious to learn of her decision to follow Christ, and of the Wednesday morning meetings with the strangers that brought her to this decision.

Hmmm. Think I'll bake him his favorite apple pie.

monday, april 16th, 2007, 11:45 a.m.

Terry Maclin could not pace his concerns away, but somehow it eased the tension. Pushing the long table in the boardroom against the wall increased his pacing space, and occasionally he stopped in front of one of the windows to stare in the direction of the baseball field. In his mind he could see himself and Reuben walking around the field, and he went over, again, their uneasy conversation. Perhaps it would have been best if he said, "Sure Reuben, no problem," when Roo first requested the pulpit. But now it had become an issue. Now the board of elders would have to be involved. Embarrassing.

Mac had no doubt the board would back him up. They always did. Yes, they would ask pertinent questions and try to give intelligent input, perhaps even make a suggestion - that's what board members do. But in the end they would express their confidence in his leadership and leave the final decision to him.

Though the leader, Mac actually had less to say than the others. He learned he didn't have to talk

much to get what he wanted, because usually everyone wanted the same result. He would give a list of business matters to the elder he appointed to chair the meetings, seldom were spiritual issues discussed with the elders, and the matter would shoot back and forth over the table. When he approved of what was being said, which was most of the time, he would smile a knowing smile while making eye contact with the speaker. When he disapproved he would smile the same smile, but look down at the table. In this simple way he steered, when steering was required, the board to an acceptable conclusion. Of course, this only worked because of the leverage he had as pastor.

Mac never asked for leverage, he never worked for it; it came with the job. And he understood it, and his superiors expected him to use it for the betterment of the congregation. Every person at the *Center,* elders included, was reliant upon a favorable standing with the pastor to be successful, socially and functionally. Not one of the elders would be an elder without his endorsement. The same was true with every ministry at the church; Pastor Mac's approval was required, another unwritten stipulation of church life. Organized ministry outside the church insists everyone has the pastor's endorsement. A poor relationship with Pastor Mac would be interpreted by everyone, Pastor Mac included, as having a sub-standard relationship with God. This all made for very good leverage.

Proficient use of leverage is the ability to use it unnoticed. It could be argued that, morally, one should not use leverage at all; everyone should be on the same level playing field. But it is most tempting to use what you have when the welfare of the church is at stake.

A board is to provide checks and balances so that one does not have excessive control over many. Power does corrupt, not always, but usually. However, the elder is in a tight spot. He wants to, needs to, please the pastor, and at the same time hold him accountable. Now an elder is an elder because he likes being an elder. As a layman, it is the highest position he could hope for. It gives him status, plus an opportunity to serve God. If he proves to be supportive he will likely be asked to serve again. His reinstatement is determined, most often, by the pastor he is supposed to hold accountable. Leverage is against him.

Mac has, on occasion, used leverage to weed out those he felt would be detrimental to the church, but only after subtle hints were ignored. Some refused to tithe, and that would be acceptable, barely, if they just kept their mouths shut about it, if they didn't negatively affect others. To protect unity, to protect the financial base, such people must be weeded out.

Pastors quickly master the art of giving non-verbal messages to dissenters, letting them know their attendance is no longer welcome. This can be communicated subtly by ignoring those persons and withholding warmth given to others. If these don't work a disapproving frown no one else sees will probably do the trick.

Mac never used the pulpit to weed out undesirables, as some pastors did. The pastor might use the *this-church-is-not-for-everybody* sermon, proven effective against nonconformists. The bottom line of this message is: *if you are not happy here, if you do not agree with the way we do things, perhaps it's*

time you found another church more to your liking. Faced with the threat of being uprooted from relationships, of having to start all over somewhere else, the dissident could quickly become a conformist, though an injured and disgruntled conformist.

Mac knew many, perhaps most, pastors in the denomination would not tolerate anyone challenging their wisdom and authority by appealing to the board. That person would never be made to feel welcome again. But Mac was a scrupulous pastor …… mostly. Rarely did he use dirty tricks. True, he was a bit of a controller. He liked to keep everything under control, and it is impossible to control circumstances without controlling people. If he didn't control, he reasoned, chaos would soon invade. It's not easy being on top.

Mac loved the seven elders. Each had a heart to serve, each was committed to the welfare of the *Center,* each a faithful tither. Two he bowled with, others he worked with in various ministries, everyone he gave a helping hand in one way or another, and they were equally eager to reciprocate. Every time there was a change in eldership he had a plaque, listing the elders, made at his own expense, and hung it in the boardroom.

Brent Anderson

Tony Borric

Nelson Chesney

Shaun Edwards

Terry Maclin

David Tomas

Sheldon Waters

Donald Williamson

Brent Anderson: owner of a car dealership…… financially the most successful in the church…… avid bowler…… much nervous energy…… overworks…… solid marriage…… one son, one daughter…… first two-year term on the board.

Tony Borric: carpenter…… quiet…… deep…… nice family…… founding member…… fifth term on the board.

Nelson Chesney: American…… accountant…… managed the *Center's* books…… wife taken by cancer…… three young daughters…… dating a lady from another church…… first term.

Shaun Edwards: salesman for a meat company…… soft…… wife, a son and two daughters, all married, several grandchildren…… quite knowledgeable in Scripture…… Sunday school director…… third term.

David Tomas: youngest…… perhaps the most spiritual…… always going to conventions…… servant's heart…… second child on the way…… first term.

Sheldon Waters: owner of an equipment rental..... chairs meetings..... heart of gold..... not the greatest bowler..... leads worship with wife on piano..... third term.

Donald Williamson: American..... oldest, but quite healthy..... retired pastor..... past district elder..... outspoken.....second term.

Mac had Vivian fax all seven information regarding Roo's request for a board decision so they would have ample time to consider the matter. Hopefully, the issue would be brought to a quick conclusion on Wednesday.

early saturday morning, march 10th, 1990

Reuben Tanner rose early Saturday morning to get a good start on the fencing of the corrals. It was spring at last, snow mostly gone, ground thawed, time to get to work. Dressed in his plumber's overalls and a sheepskin jacket, he marked out the location of each of the corral posts with short wooden pegs, following his dad's instructions given last night over the phone.

His dad had told him to determine the center of the corral, drive a small pipe into the ground at center point, put a noose on the end of a twenty-five-foot rope, and drop the noose over the pipe. Then he was to tie a pointed stick on the other end of the rope, dragging the point of the stick on the ground as he revolved around the pipe to make a perfect fifty-foot circle scratched on the surface. Next he was to mark the circle every nine and a half feet with pegs, the distance required for the ten-foot long horizontal stringers. Reuben was not surprised the last peg was the desired four feet from the first, exactly right for a gate. His dad knew what he was doing.

After marking out the three corrals, he marked out the post locations for the fence on each side of the roadway leading away from the house. Altogether there were sixty-eight posts to be installed, sixty-eight holes to be dug, each two feet deep, each with a hand-held post-hole digger. It was a lot of work. Combined with nailing the stringers, three high between each post, Reuben figured at least six full Saturdays, maybe more. After just four holes his arms were starting to weary, the ground being a mixture of soil and small rocks.

Off in the distance he noticed a tractor on his roadway, heading towards him. *Who can that be?* he wondered. *Who do I know who owns a tractor?* As the tractor got closer, he was quite happy to see a posthole digger mounted on the back of the tractor. The guy driving the tractor jumped off and said, "Hi! I'm Terry Maclin. My friends call me Mac. Thought you could use a hand."

Reuben was quite aware who Terry Maclin was, the guy who got his Jeni hooked on religion. He didn't respond to Mac's greeting, didn't say a word, ignored Mac's outstretched hand. Mac broke the awkward silence by climbing on the tractor, turned it around, backed the spiral blade towards the next peg. Begrudgingly, Reuben waved him back until the blade was in the right spot. Mac engaged the machine, waiting for Reuben to signal when he was deep enough, and then, in just a couple of minutes, he was backing towards the next peg. Being a farm boy, Mac and tractors got along just

fine. Three hours later sixty-eight holes were dug. Mac shut down the noisy tractor, leaving them both in uncomfortable silence once again.

Reuben turned his back on Mac, walking to the pile of five-inch posts, carrying two at a time, lying each near a hole. When the ex-farm boy jumped on the tractor Reuben thought he got rid of his uninvited visitor. But no, Mac drove to the pile of posts, loading about thirty at a time on the front forks, and drove to where Reuben was standing watching him. Reuben begrudgingly unloaded the posts as Mac drove beside each hole. It was now three in the afternoon, there were sixty-eight holes, each with a post lying nearby, and neither had stopped for a break. Reuben had bottled water but didn't drink, nor did he offer it to his helper.

From the log house kitchen Jeni was watching with apprehension. The table was set for lunch, but Reuben and Mac didn't stop working. About three p.m. she considered bringing out coffee and sandwiches, but decided no, let them be.

Mac held the posts in place with Reuben's long level while Reuben filled the hole, tamping the dirt as he did so. This two-man job would have been awkward for Reuben by himself, but because there were two the posts went in quickly. Mac traded level for shovel after thirty-four posts to make sure he did his share of the tough labor. Five o'clock now, and it looked like Reuben had no intention of stopping for supper. Mac drove his tractor to the huge pile of stringers, and together they loaded them on the forks, distributing them between the posts. It was now six o'clock, both were tired, both were hungry, neither let on they were either.

Now it was time to nail the horizontal stringers to the upright posts. Reuben's plan was to tie the stringers in place to the posts with wire, nail on the stringers with six-inch spiral nails, and then remove the wire. Time consuming. With the extra pair of hands, one held the end of the stringer in place while the other nailed. Much faster. It was hard holding the post while someone was hammering a nail into it, so Mac drove his tractor against the post, and that took care of that problem.

It was getting dark so Reuben brought his pick-up close and turned on the headlights. They continued to work into the night, neither uttering a word. Reuben was surprised Mac lasted the day, more surprised he worked through the evening into the night, this without food or water or rest. Reuben was exhausted and would have quit hours ago, but he would not be outworked by a Christian. He didn't know he was competing with a toughened ex-marine as strong-willed as himself.

It was ten minutes before midnight when the last nail was hammered in place. Mac climbed on the tractor to leave, and then, impulsively, he jumped off again, walking to Reuben leaning on a fence post.

"When my wife Vivian and I visited Jeni I noticed quite a few baseball trophies on the fireplace mantle."

No response.

"Our church has put together a pretty good men's baseball team. We play against other church teams. We could use your help. There is, however, a stipulation. Everyone on the team has to attend *Bryden Falls Community Christian Center."*

No response.

"I would like you to join our team. I will make an exception in your case. You will only have to attend Sunday service twice a month."

No response. Mac turned to leave, hesitated, and then said, "You know, if my wife were attending a church I would want to know who the people are and what they stand for." He jumped on the tractor and waved good-bye, avoiding eye contact, knowing the plumber would not wave back. He could not remember being so tired, and it would be another hour before he was home in bed.

Reuben's head was blurred from fatigue, his body ached everywhere. Still leaning on the post he stared at the three finished corrals visible in the moonlight and the fence bordering both sides of the roadway, a job that was to take six or seven Saturdays. And then he watched the tractor lights bobbing on his potholed road heading for the highway, trying to figure out the guy that just matched him in a long, strenuous day's labor, a pastor no less.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" he said incredulously.

CHAPTER THREE

tuesday, april 17th 2007, 8:15 p.m.

Vivian Maclin hosted the *Center's* women's Bible study and prayer meeting at her home every Tuesday evening, and has done so faithfully for many years. The basement rec room made an excellent meeting room. Many ping-pong duels have been fought here over the years, as well as lots of dart games and Bible trivia games. Adjacent is a small nook with a miniature fridge and small counter, handy for making coffee and tea. Sitting around the ping-pong table, now covered with a bright cloth, are the usual group of middle-aged women consisting mostly of elders' wives, about a dozen altogether, most on the plump side or, like Vivian, heading in that direction. Jeni Tanner was the exception; five times her body swelled in pregnancy and five times shrunk to normal within a year after delivery.

Missing in the Bible/prayer group are young women. Even Katie stopped attending, much to her mom's disapproval. The young women who used to come are now the middle-aged, and the middle-aged are the aged. With few exceptions, they had not, spiritually, produced after themselves. Even daughters could not be enticed to join them.

Vivian had been teaching on *The Holy Spirit* to coincide with her husband's teaching on the same

subject the past several Sundays, but decided to change to *Church Disciplines.* She wanted to ensure the ladies were well grounded in their understanding of what made and preserved healthy church life. She made the decision to change direction last night. She knew why Terry got up in the middle of the night to sit by himself in the living room. Something was bothering him, and she knew it wasn't normal church concerns though always more than a few.

Vivian had read the memo to the elders before faxing them a copy, shocked to learn of Reuben Tanner's appeal to the board. She was more than a little indignant someone would challenge her husband's authority. She could not, yet, express her indignation to her husband about Reuben Tanner's outrageous request to have access to the pulpit; it was still a private matter between Reuben and the church board. Vivian was sure the elders' wives knew nothing of the matter, having marked the memo *Private Matter* as Terry instructed.

No, Vivian concluded, there were only two women in the room who knew of this: herself and Jeni Tanner. It was Vivian's intention to use what leverage she had to come to the aid of her husband and the church she loved. Hopefully, Jeni would be influenced by tonight's study and, in turn, influence her husband to back down. Wives are good at that.

Being married to a pastor, Vivian was aware, even more than the elders, just how precarious the situation was. Preparing coffee and tea for the ladies, she could not shut her mind down. *If the board rules against Reuben, then what?* she wondered. *Would he forget the whole matter, and everything return to normal? If not, what are his options? Try to speak to the church people individually? Rent a hall? Send letters? Anything he did would create division, for everyone would know he did not have the blessing of the pastor or the board.*

If Reuben Tanner were not so influential he would not be a threat. Yes, he was a mere usher but everyone loved Roo and his family. The many who had long been at the *Center* knew Reuben was more instrumental in the building project than anyone other than Pastor Mac. The *Challengers* would not be much of a challenge without Reuben behind home plate and his 400 plus batting average. The Tanner family was a strength to the *Center,* unlike any other except the Maclins. True, Reuben was somewhat a loner the last few years; one could no longer call him a team player. But he did come across as sincere and generous and faithful.

And if the board conceded to his request, what problems would that create? Vivian questioned herself. *Why should Reuben be privileged to preach when I, who would have to be considered the* Center's *co-founder, have never been invited? Nor any of the elders. And not, at least not yet, Pastor Phil.* The more Vivian considered the matter the more difficult it was to hold her anger.

The imminent threat to her husband, her church, even her children kept rousing heated thoughts. *And where did Jeni Tanner stand on this issue? Is she in league with her husband, or does her loyalty rest with the church that nourished her and her family these many years? If it weren't for me Jeni Tanner would be standing on a street corner with an* Awake! *magazine in her hand!*

"Please turn to Psalm 133," Vivian began the lesson after opening prayer. "And could someone read it out loud?"

Sheila Tomas, heavy with her second child and the youngest present, volunteered:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is

For brethren to dwell together in unity!

It is like the precious oil upon the head,

Running down on the beard,

The beard of Aaron,

Running down on the edge of his garments.

It is like the dew of Hermon,

Descending upon the mountains of Zion;

For there the Lord commanded the blessing-

Life forevermore.

After emphasizing the point that Psalm 133 was a promise that God would bless those who lived in unity, Vivian asked the group for comments.

Mrs. Williamson was never shy to respond. "For every positive side of a promise there is a negative side. If we do *not* dwell in unity, the Lord will *not* pour out His blessings."

"Amen!" they all agreed.

"Then the question is, how do we dwell in unity?" Vivian asked. And before anyone responded she referred them to Hebrews 13:7:

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.

Vivian asked, "How do we apply this verse to life at the *Center?"*

Mrs. Williamson had been a pastor's wife for years and was quick to answer. "We all know this would be in reference to the pastor, in our case Pastor Maclin."

"It would also refer to the elders," Mrs. Edwards added.

"This would also refer to someone like you, Vivian," added Mrs. Waters. "You are giving leadership through this Bible study."

"And now, ladies," Vivian said, "let us go to the first book of Peter and see what Peter has to say on

the matter. Would someone please read the first four verses of chapter five?"

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed:

Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly;

nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;

and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.

"Comments, anyone?" Vivian was hoping Jeni would give some input, but she was usually the most quiet of the group.

"Well, we know from this text that God gave us elders to lead us," Mrs. Williamson said.

"Yes, they are to shepherd us," said another.

"Then we must allow ourselves to be shepherded?" Vivian asked.

"Certainly. Amen. Of course."

Vivian led the group through similar passages with the intent of building an ironclad case for submissiveness to recognized authority. *But is Jeni getting it?* Vivian wanted to know. "Jeni," she asked at last, "we haven't heard from you tonight. Do you have any thoughts to share before we close the study in prayer?"

"Well, I do have a few thoughts," Jeni replied hesitantly. "I think we must be sure unity is founded on *truth.* I remember Pastor Mac pointing out to me, just before I came to Christ, that the worse countries in the world are often the most unified. The people the Lord blesses are those who are united *to Him* and walking in fellowship with *His* ways. I don't think the Lord wants us to blindly obey any man. That kind of loyalty is disloyalty to Christ."

Silence.

And more silence.

Finally, Sheila Tomas responded. "Yes, of course. I suppose that puts the onus on each of us to determine what is right and true."

Mrs. Williamson was brusque. "Can you imagine a congregation of four hundred trying to come to a conclusion? Impossible! That would be chaos! We must have confidence in our leaders! They are ordained by God to show us the way!"

For Vivian, Jeni's contribution was a slap in the face. *There is no doubt,* she concluded, *that Jeni Tanner's sympathies are not with us.*

"Perhaps," Vivian interrupted the animated conversation, "we can safely conclude we should obey leadership to the degree we are able, without compromising what we personally believe to be the truth."

Mrs. Williamson just had to say, "I for one have confidence in the leadership of *Bryden Falls Community Christian Center!"*

And from there they moved to a time of uneasy prayer, and from there they moved to an uneasy time of fellowship over coffee and tea and Vivian's muffins. Vivian looked for an opportunity to talk to Jeni one-to-one. "Jeni, would you please help me carry these plates and leftovers upstairs?"

"Certainly."

"Did you enjoy the Bible study?" she asked Jeni when they were alone in the kitchen.

"I am afraid I upset the study with my comments."

"Well, I did ask for your input. May I ask, Jeni, are you anxious about the board's meeting tomorrow?"

"No, should I be?"

"Perhaps you don't grasp the seriousness of the situation."

"Situation?"

"Don't you realize the seriousness of appealing to the board, challenging my husband's judgment?"

"Vivian, I've done no such thing!" Jeni protested.

Vivian was in no mood for trifling. "I know *you* didn't appeal to the board. I am referring to Reuben."

"Reuben?"

"Yes. You mean you don't know?"

"I don't know what you are talking about."

Vivian had a choice, to apologize or attack. It had been a hard day and a harder evening, and she was in no mood for apologizing. "You mean to tell me your husband has upset the pastor and threatened the stability of the church, and you, his wife, know nothing about it? This makes me very suspicious."

"Suspicious?"

"The secrecy. I thought husbands and wives were a team. They did things together. Isn't that what marriage is all about?"

Jeni was unable to take it all in. Appeal? The pastor? The board? Wednesday's meeting? Thankfully, Katie burst into the kitchen with a "Hi Mom! Hi Mrs. Tanner!"

Jeni packed up her confusion and excused herself. She would use the half-hour ride home to get a handle on all this.

wednesday, april 18th, 2007, 7:15 p.m

Seven elders and Pastor Mac sat around the lengthy boardroom table, Mac on the end closest to the folding doors, now closed, separating the boardroom and his office. Phil Ferguson was also present; even though not officially on the board his attendance was welcomed and expected. The other end of the table was always vacant. Phil had hoped that, as assistant pastor, he would be asked to sit in that honored place, but never was. He didn't even have a vote. Sheldon Waters sat next to Mac, on his left, and chaired the meetings. All kept to the same placement, month after month, as if their names were engraved there. In the center of the table was a very large Bible, always opened at Psalm 119:105, the words highlighted, *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*

Already they had discussed a number of issues. Phil Ferguson gave an update of the *MorLord Worship Band,* and their preparation for the performance on *Foundation Fathers Festival* in June. Shaun Edwards gave a report on Sunday school attendance, children and adult, which was continuing to dwindle, offering suggestions how they might rearrange the scheduling to make it more suitable. Tony Borric, in charge of maintenance, reported a few improvements, the most costly being the carpet replacement in the sanctuary. Nelson Chesney gave a report on finances, suggesting Pastor Mac continually remind the people of their responsibility to tithe. There was discussion about eventually bringing Phil Ferguson on full-time, depending on collections. Pastor Mac gave an overview of outreach ministries coming up in the summer, some of which involved teaming up with other churches.

And soon it was time to discuss the matter on everybody's mind, Reuben Tanner.

Sheldon Waters: I trust everyone received Pastor Mac's memo regarding Reuben Tanner's appeal to the board?

Donald Williamson: A most unusual memo. I had been a pastor for many years before retirement and never had I been approached by a layman for access to the pulpit. A testimony, yes. A praise report, occasionally. But no one ever actually asked to preach. Most unusual.

Brent Anderson: Not only unusual, but he doesn't seem to want to take no for an answer.

Nelson Chesney: There's a simple solution. We tell him "no" and that's that.

Sheldon Waters: I agree. We hired a pastor to make these decisions. Let us show Reuben we support him fully.

Phil Ferguson: I also agree. Reuben must know we are together on this.

Sheldon Waters: Are we ready for a vote?

David Tomas: Wait a minute! We are acting like Reuben has done something unethical. So far, all we know is that he disagrees with a decision Pastor Mac has made and he is appealing to us for a judgment on the matter. Should we not make a judgment?

Tony Borric: I hear you, David. Pastor Mac, did Reuben give an indication why he wanted to speak to the congregation?

Terry Maclin: No, and I didn't ask him. I didn't want to confuse the issue. I wanted him to understand the reason I turned him down was because it is our policy that only those endorsed by the denomination are given the pulpit.

David Tomas: Has this always been our policy?

Donald Williamson: It is the policy of every church in our denomination. In *every* denomination that I know of.

Tony Borric: And the reason for the policy?

Nelson Chesney: Obviously to maintain purity of the Word.

Shaun Edwards: Pastor, has a board in past years officially made this our policy?

Terry Maclin: Not that I can remember.

Shaun Edwards: Perhaps we should make it our official policy tonight.

Donald Williamson: I agree. It shouldn't be necessary, but it will close the door to similar problems.

David Tomas: Problems? A respected brother in our congregation asks us to make a judgment, and we consider that request a problem?

Phil Ferguson: It's more problematic than one might think. If we open the pulpit to Reuben we would be opening it to the entire congregation.

David Tomas: I am not saying we should give Reuben, or anyone else, the pulpit. I am saying we should not consider it a problem when someone requests us to make a judgment.

Shaun Edwards: I think David does have a valid point. Why are we here?

Tony Borric: Yes. It's like a judge who has been given authority to make judgments but is insulted when asked to do so.

Donald Williamson: Hold on now! I don't think I like where this is going. We are here to assist the pastor. Period.

David Tomas: Oh? Or is the pastor here to assist us? I think we should clarify our roles and responsibilities. To me it has always been a blur.

Brent Anderson: Now wait a minute! Let's think this out. We hire a pastor to run the church. The people *expect* Pastor Mac to run the church. We are to help him do the job we hired him to do.

Donald Williamson: Brent, you make him sound like a hireling! He is the shepherd of the sheep. We pay him a salary so he is able to shepherd.

Brent Anderson: I stand corrected. Forgive my poor choice of words, Pastor Mac.

Shaun Edwards: I must say again that David Tomas has a valid point. Our role and responsibilities as elders has always been obscure to me as well. We seem threatened by a simple request to make a judgment.

Tony Borric: Can we agree it is our responsibility to make a decision on this matter? And we should not be offended when asked by a member of the congregation to make a judgment? What do you say, Pastor Mac?

Terry Maclin: When I responded to Reuben's request for access to the pulpit I thought I was expressing the will of the board. I would like to know if I was correct. Further, I admit I was slighted at Reuben's request to take this matter to the board, but in hindsight I see that I should not have taken offense.

Tony Borric: I must say, I respect your candor.

Brent Anderson: Amen!

Others: Amen!

Sheldon Waters: It seems the first business at hand is to determine, or perhaps I should say illuminate, our role as a board. Are we merely a band of helpers, our main duty to assist Pastor Mac and Pastor Phil? Or should we see these men as an extension of *our* authority?

Donald Williamson: I find it amazing this question should be brought up more than fifteen years after the church's conception. Is anyone suggesting we should consider breaking from denominational policy? Frankly, I find it appalling.

Phil Ferguson: And scary.

Tony Borric: My friends, let's cool it a bit. Is there really a subject, any subject of concern, that is beyond discussion? What are we afraid of?

Donald Williamson: Division. That's what I'm afraid of. I see this matter is already playing havoc with the unity we enjoy.

Phil Ferguson: And employ.

Sheldon Waters: What do you mean, Pastor Phil?

Phil Ferguson: I am the new kid on the block, and I don't want to sound over opinionated. But I think what the *Center* has over most churches is unity, an unusual unity that must be credited to Pastor Mac. This unity is a tool to do good works in this community. If we lose our united front we will lose our effectiveness.

Donald Williamson: Amen!

Others: Amen!

Sheldon Waters: So where do we go from here?

Donald Williamson: I think we should put this issue behind us before it causes further division. We inform Tanner we endorse Pastor Mac's judgment.

Sheldon Waters: Does everyone agree? It would be nice to have unanimity. Let's go around the table. Donald has already spoken, so you're next Nelson.

Nelson Chesney: I agree. For the good of the *Center.*

Shaun Edwards: I agree.

Brent Anderson: I agree.

Tony Borric: I agree.

David Tomas: I disagree.

Donald Williamson: We cannot expect to be unanimous on every issue. Sometimes we must go by majority rule. I say again, let's put this matter behind us.

Brent Anderson: Amen.

Phil Ferguson: Amen.

Tony Borric: Not so fast. We have always come to a unanimous conclusion. David, why do you disagree?

David Tomas: Let's look at it. What I hear is: In order to preserve unity we should refuse to discuss the matter. Is that sound, adult reasoning? Would we teach our children such logic?

Tony Borric: I see your point.

Sheldon Waters: Okay. Let's dig a little deeper. Pastor Mac, did Reuben give any hint as to why we should give him the pulpit?

Terry Maclin: He simply said he believed the Lord wants him to give an important message to the church. He said he searched the New Testament and could find no reason he should be denied his request to have the pulpit two successive Sundays.

Donald Williamson: *Two* Sundays? This gets better and better!

Sheldon Waters: We must come to a conclusion. Is Reuben correct? Is there anything in the New Testament, or for that matter the entire Bible, that would indicate a layman should not be given opportunity to speak to the congregation? Anyone? Shaun, you have been appointed the Sunday school director because we all acknowledge your superior knowledge of the Word; please share your perspective.

Donald Williamson: Oh, so now we are going to have a Bible study! Why don't we go around the table and everyone give their interpretation of the Bible?

David Tomas: Mr. Williamson! Why do you want to shut us up?! What are you afraid of?!

Terry Maclin: David!

David Tomas: Sorry, Pastor. Mr. Williamson, you are my elder in the Lord. I apologize for being disrespectful.

Sheldon Waters: I think I need a coffee. What do you say we break for twenty minutes?

thursday, april 12th, 2007, 6:35 p.m.

Tall and slight Sally Kenny had never been to *Bryden Falls Baseball Field,* but had heard about the Canadian church team that dared to challenge American supremacy of the game, though most of the remarks she heard were wrapped in sarcasm. Her sunglasses did not ensure she would not be noticed from the baseball diamond so she looked for a seat near the top of the bleachers next to another lady. Sitting alone could make her noticeable; this way she would appear to be part of a family.

"Is this spot taken?" she asked a lady who seemed to be her age and who seemed to be the mother of the children sitting beside her.

"Not at all! Please! Have a seat! The game is about to begin."

"Thank you." *Something different about these kids,* Sally thought. *They aren't squirming and slouching and unruly.*

"I don't recall seeing you here before."

"First time," Sally replied.

"What are your first impressions of our baseball park?"

"Very clean. Well kept. I'm surprised there are so many fans."

"Do you know any of the players?"

"One."

"On the visitor's team? I thought I noticed an American accent."

"Yes, I am an American. Even this close to the border we still sound a little different, don't we?"

"Welcome to Canada. Welcome to Bryden Falls."

"Thank you. I have heard about your church team. It's incredible that one church could produce an entire team."

"Unusual, isn't it?"

"You are the talk of the entire league. Every once in a while I read an article in our newspaper about you."

"Yes, and our papers are always intrigued with the *Challengers.* I think, in a small way, it helps to strengthen the relationship between our countries."

"There is a lot of anti-American sentiment in Canada, isn't there?"

"I am embarrassed to say, that is quite true. However, in Bryden Falls we don't have that problem. We are somewhat isolated from Canadian cities because of the mountains, but in proximity with American cities and towns. We have some Americans attending our church."

"Are all of these children yours?"

"Yes, and I have one on the field. There he is at shortstop. Do you have a family?"

"A girl and a boy. Sixteen and fourteen. My daughter plays softball, my son baseball, like his father."

"Is your husband here this evening?"

"No, my *ex*-husband is here this evening. He's the coach of the *Grizzlies,* and one of their pitchers."

"You mean to tell me you are Tree's wife?!"

"Ex-wife."

"You are Sally Kenny?!"

"Yes, but we have never met, have we?"

"We have your picture on our fireplace! You and Tree……that is, you and Trevor. We have had it there for fifteen years. I *thought* you looked familiar."

"I don't understand."

"Well, it's a bit of a story. But I am *very* pleased to meet you after all these years. My name is Jeni Tanner."

"I am pleased to meet you."

"I am *thrilled* to meet *you!* We, that is Reuben and I……that's my husband the back catcher for the *Challengers*……we have been praying for you all these years."

"But you don't know me. Do you know my hus……I mean, my *ex*-husband?"

"Not really. I think Reuben knows Tree through baseball, but they are not well acquainted."

"Then why do you pray for us?"

"Terry Maclin……he's the pastor of - "

"Mac? Mac is a friend of ours."

"And of ours. He handed us a photo of you and Trevor, a wedding picture, and asked us to pray for you both. We were so indebted to Mac we were glad to help him in any way we could. We had the photo enlarged and framed. It reminds us of our commitment to pray for you every day. Sometimes we pray for you, that is, you and Trevor, as a family at meal times."

"I am overwhelmed."

"Third man to bat, number sixteen, short stop, John Tanner!"

Jeni had so far paid little attention to the game and even the announcer's mention of her son's name didn't register.

"Mom!" the youngest of Jeni's children interrupted, "John's up to bat!"

"Oh excuse me, Sally. This is John's first time to bat. Not only the first game of the season, but his first in the men's league."

John would have struck out, but the catcher missed Tree's pitch and John made it to first base.

"Well, he got on base," Sally said.

"It's hard getting a hit when Tree's pitching," Jeni said. "I think he's the best in the league."

"Next batter, number 21, back catcher, Reuben, Roo, Tanner!"

"Roo! Roo! Roo! Roo!" the *Challengers* fans shouted.

"Tell me, Sally, why did you come this evening? And please, if I am trespassing do not hesitate to tell me to mind my own business."

"You are not trespassing. Frankly, I do not know why I came. I felt drawn somehow."

"I think I know."

"Really?"

"To me it is obvious. God led you here."

"No!"

"Think about it, Sally. You are sitting next to a person who has been praying for you for fifteen years. Coincidence?"

"Well, I do believe in God. That is, I believe there *is* a God. But I never thought of Him as someone who pays much attention to us."

"Jeni!" someone interrupted their conversation. It was Tony Borric sitting just in front of the Tanners with his family. "I think Reuben is about to be hit with the baseball!"

"What do you mean, Tony? I don't understand!"

"Their pitcher is trying to get Reuben to back away from the plate, but Reuben is not budging. I think the next pitch will be aimed right at him."

Sally's heart was pounding. "Oh my God!" she exclaimed.

"Mommy! Daddy got hit with the ball!"

"Did you see that, Mom? Dad got hit on the hand! I think the pitcher did it on purpose!"

"I am so sorry!" Sally said to Jeni, her face reddened with embarrassment.

"He will be okay, Sally. Now, what were we talking about? Oh yes. God will be as personal as you want Him to be."

"Excuse me! My husband," Sally was so rattled she forgot to say ex-husband, "just intentionally hit your husband with a fastball! That really, really hurts. Doesn't that make you angry?"

"Reuben and I are dedicated to the Lord Jesus Christ. No, I am not angry. And neither is Reuben."

"I don't understand you. Maybe I should tell you something about Trevor. Trevor hates God. He curses Him daily. And he hates Christians. The reason he likes playing the *Challengers* is because he likes to strike them out. It's a way of getting back at God."

Jeni wanted to get back on track. "Sally you are here for a reason. I think God would have us be friends."

"Ironic. I just divorced a man who *hates* God. Now I am invited to befriend someone who *loves* God. Something to think about."

Jeni thought it best to cool it a bit, and the two ladies watched the game in silence. A while later Sally was watching the man she still loved, the husband of eighteen years, her high school boyfriend, at the plate, bat in hand, facing his best friend on the pitcher's mound. She would never have left him if it were not for the children. She would have been there to nurse him through the aftermath of a bloodied conflict, to wake him from his nightmares, to be the listening ears as he

vented his hatred for himself and God and the miserable life he had no power to enrich. But she had to free the children from their dad, and the hellish war he brought into their lives; they have suffered enough. She had to divorce herself from the man and the memories and the depression. Soon she would take her children far away, to another state. What would become of her man without them? He would not follow, of that she was certain. He would immerse himself in booze. He would hate the more.

She liked being here. He did not know of her presence, and she could watch him without watching *over* him. She was not the nurse, she was at a movie theater watching her man, her ex-man, on a screen, detached and not responsible. She would enjoy any movie he was in as long as he didn't know she was watching. And then she stood to her feet, sensing something was wrong.

"What is it, Sally?"

She sat down again, and whispered, "Trevor is having flashbacks!"

"Are you sure? How can you tell?"

"Believe me, I know!"

"Of course. I'm sorry. Children, let's pray for the man at bat."

"Is that Mr. Kenny, Mom, the one we've been praying for?"

"Yes, and I think he needs our prayers now." Sitting in line, they linked by holding each other's hand, and bowed in serious prayer. Without asking permission Jeni grabbed Sally's hand and could feel Sally squeezing tightly. Sally was not praying, however, her eyes fixed on the tall man with the shaggy mustache in the *Grizzlies* cap staring stupidly at the pitcher. Sally knew that Mac knew. What would Mac do? This had never happened on a baseball field before. Was Trevor getting worse? She was astounded to see Reuben, the very one Trevor purposely injured a few moments previous, gently guide her Trevor back to his dugout. It was all too much to absorb. Time to get back to the real world.

"I am going now," she said to Jeni. "I ask you not to mention my being here to anyone."

"Of course. Oh, may I mention you to my husband? He would be thrilled to know I met you."

After nodding affirmatively, she looked at each of the four children who politely returned her eye contact, and thought she saw in them true sanity in an insane world. "Maybe God really is a nice person." Then the tall and slender lady in the sunglasses exited Jeni's life as abruptly as she had entered.

wednesday, april 18th, 2007, 8:30 p.m.

Mac was surprised, but not disturbed, by the fervor the guys were displaying regarding Reuben Tanner's appeal to the board. Upon consideration, he realized that for once they were discussing

something that really mattered, and detected they, or at least some, were enjoying themselves, daring to confront traditional boundaries, even questioning their purpose as a board.

As a pastor, Mac was always careful to express and act in accordance to what he believed to be the will of the board. There was little chance of conflict because he, more than any other, shaped that will. He interviewed all candidates before being brought in to make sure they were in harmony with him. Mac still had little doubt the board would return the matter into his hands and express their confidence in his judgment. What else could they do? Certainly they were not going to arrive at a unanimous conclusion. Coffee time over, the nine returned to their seats.

Terry Maclin: For the first time in years we seem to be having a heated discussion. And that's okay. I want to encourage everyone to speak freely. Sheldon, you were saying.

Sheldon Waters: I was asking, what does the New Testament have to say that would shed some light on Reuben's request to speak to the congregation? Apparently Reuben had said he searched the New Testament and could find no reason why he couldn't speak to the people.

Shaun Edwards: I thought about that during the break. It's not that black and white. While there is nothing forbidding a layman from preaching, there is nothing encouraging it either.

Sheldon Waters: What *does* the Bible have to say about laymen?

Shaun Edwards: Actually, the word *layman* is not in the Bible. I suppose it's a term to describe those that are not in leadership.

Nelson Chesney: Interesting. There are seven of us at this table who consider themselves laymen, and the word can't be found in the Bible.

Donald Williamson: Come on, Chesney! The word *trinity* can't be found in the Bible either, but we all believe in the trinity!

Nelson Chesney: Good point.

Sheldon Waters: I wonder how all this applies to Reuben. Anyone?

Phil Ferguson: When the Bible speaks of elders who are to watch over the flock, it shows us clearly that there are those who lead and those who are led. Two distinct groups. The *few* are to look after the *many.* I think we can safely assume the elders were the spokesmen. It doesn't matter what we call the few or what we call the many. The word *clergy* cannot be found in the Bible either. Nonetheless, there was clergy then and there are clergy now. The elders are responsible before God and will have to give an account one day. The laymen are to support the clergy and submit to them.

Donald Williamson: Amen! Well said!

Others: Amen. Sounds right. Right on.

David Tomas: I see a problem with that.

Sheldon Waters: We're listening, David.

David Tomas: Pastor Phil, your logic seems to be that Reuben shouldn't preach because he is not an elder. We *are* elders so therefore we must be qualified even though we are not licensed. And if we *are* qualified to preach, why don't we? And why is Reuben not equally qualified? He has been a Christian as long as many of us in this room. Is his understanding of the Bible inferior to ours? I think not.

Donald Williamson: Oh my Lord!

David Tomas: Mr. Williamson, can you answer my question?

Donald Williamson: The elders in the New Testament are not the same as elders today!

David Tomas: In what way?

Donald Williamson: Times were different then. Spiritually, the elders were in closer lineage to the apostles of Christ. You are not …… that is, we, us elders, are not necessarily qualified to preach.

Shaun Edwards: Actually, one of the biblical requirements of an elder is that he *is* able to teach.

David Tomas: How can it be that we are not able to teach? Are you saying that sitting under Pastor Mac's ministry all these years has not qualified us to teach?

Shaun Edwards: Correction. Some of us *do* teach. We teach Sunday school. We are always looking for more teachers.

Donald Williamson: That's right! But we leave the Sunday service preaching to the pastor!

David Tomas: Are we saying that we are qualified to teach *part* of the church, but not *all* the church? Something wrong with this picture.

Phil Ferguson: That's just the way it is. It is the same in every denomination I know of.

Tony Borric: So it is right because everybody does it?

Phil Ferguson: It is not a moral issue, Tony. It is a matter of practicality.

David Tomas: Is it practicality or is it control?

Phil Ferguson: I don't understand your question.

David Tomas: I think we are limiting God when we limit access to the pulpit.

Donald Williamson: Tell me, Tomas, do you have a secret desire, a need perhaps, a hidden ambition, to get your hands on the pulpit?

Terry Maclin: Donald!

David Tomas: Let me respond. If we forbid Reuben access to the pulpit without a legitimate reason we are forbidding ourselves from *ever* giving the word to the congregation. Can we live with that?

Nelson Chesney: David has a point. Probably we would never preach anyhow, we never have in the past, but to make it a policy sounds scary.

Donald Williamson: Not as scary as opening the pulpit to the congregation!

Sheldon Waters: I must say I find this discussion fascinating. But let's try to stay on track. The question is: Is there a biblical reason to forbid Reuben access to the pulpit?

Tony Borric: Perhaps the question should be expanded: Is there a biblical reason why *anyone* should be denied the pulpit?

Donald Williamson: I say the only way to maintain purity of the word is to limit the pulpit to pastors! They are licensed! They are endorsed!

David Tomas: You seem to be applying a double standard, Mr. Williamson. You say we elders are not qualified because we are not in close lineage to the apostles. But pastors are equally distant, and yet you suggest they *are* qualified.

Sheldon Waters: What was the role of pastors in the New Testament as compared to the elders? Shaun?

Shaun Edwards: This might surprise you, but the New Testament rarely speaks of pastors. As a matter of fact, the word *pastors* is only mentioned once. No one in the New Testament is identified as a pastor.

David Tomas: Except Jesus.

Shaun Edwards: Yes, except Jesus. He referred to Himself as "the good shepherd." The word *pastor* means shepherd.

Nelson Chesney: Surprise, surprise.

Donald Williamson: If that's correct, the mentioning of the word *pastors* one time is enough. It tells us there were pastors.

Nelson Chesney: Were the apostles pastors?

Shaun Edwards: The Bible differentiates between an apostle and a pastor.

David Tomas: Peter called himself an elder, not a pastor.

Nelson Chesney: Wow! That makes me feel important!

Sheldon Waters: Are you okay with all of this, Pastor Mac?

Terry Maclin: I'm okay. Everyone speak freely.

Tony Borric: Thank you, Pastor Mac. I needed that. It looks like we have to face the fact the way we do things is not patterned after the New Testament early church.

Nelson Chesney: That's hard to swallow. We are elders, but not the same as the New Testament elders. We have two pastors, but the Bible speaks very little of pastors. Can you shed some light on this, Pastor Mac?

Terry Maclin: I can try. We are affiliated with a denomination that operates under certain rules and criterion. I for one have confidence in the wisdom of those above me, and at the same time have no doubt they are not perfect. Their policies are for the purpose of maintaining order. I believe God is a God of order. The opposite to order is chaos. Chaos will move in as soon as order is removed. If we have questions regarding scriptural authenticity of certain practices we should forward those concerns to head office.

Nelson Chesney: Thank you, Pastor Mac. I think what you are saying is that we should either stick to denominational policy, or try to have that policy reversed.

Sheldon Waters: Are we in agreement? Let's go around the table. You first, Donald.

Donald Williamson: I can accept that. I agree.

Nelson Chesney: I agree.

Shaun Edwards: I agree.

Brent Anderson: I agree.

Tony Borric: I agree

David Tomas: I can agree on one condition.

Sheldon Waters: What condition, David?

David Tomas: We close that Bible sitting in the middle of the table!

Donald Williamson: Oh come on, Tomas!

Sheldon Waters: Let's hear him. David?

David Tomas: Let's be clear about this. We are about to make a decision to follow denominational policy over the Bible. So let's not pretend we give reverence to the Bible.

Nelson Chesney: David, I think you just insulted everybody here, including Pastor Mac!

Phil Ferguson: I think what you heard Pastor Mac say is quite different than what the rest of us heard!

I heard him say his confidence is in the denomination's understanding of the Bible!

Tony Borric: Pastor Phil, I respectfully disagree. I don't think I heard Pastor Mac declare his confidence in the denomination's interpretation of the Bible, but rather their common sense wisdom.

Donald Williamson: You got a problem with common sense wisdom?

David Tomas: Is our authority going to be human wisdom or the Bible? Let us not give allegiance to man while pretending to give allegiance to God's Word.

Donald Williamson: Oh my Lord!

Sheldon Waters: Let's cool it now. We shouldn't have to go outside this room to determine if a certain practice is biblically sound or not biblically sound, and I am referring to a layman having access to the pulpit. Surely the nine of us know enough Scripture collectively to answer that simple question.

David Tomas: And if we forbid Reuben to preach on non-Scriptural grounds we must admit that the Bible is *not* our authority.

Donald Williamson: This is madness! I maintain that denominational policies are based on sound biblical principles!

Tony Borric: Then we should have no anxiety comparing these policies to the Bible.

Sheldon Waters: Brent, we haven't heard from you for a while.

Brent Anderson: I started off enjoying this unusual discussion but frankly, now I'm a bit shaken. I have always assumed our model has been the Bible. Now I am not so sure. I suggest we give ourselves a bit of time to digest all of this. Can we put a decision off until next month's meeting? Pastor Mac?

Terry Maclin: I don't think that would be fair to Reuben.

Brent Anderson: Could we have a special meeting in a few days?

Nelson Chesney: We all know how difficult that is. Most of us are heavily scheduled. The chances of us finding an evening we are all free is slim.

Sheldon Waters: How about Saturday?

David Tomas: I am out of town. A convention.

Donald Williamson: Good! Saturday sounds like an excellent day for a meeting!

Everyone: Loud laughter.

Tony Borric. Me too. Out-of-town wedding.

Brent Anderson: I have a suggestion. Let's meet here for supper. We will call the meeting for four,

order some fast food for five, and adjourn the meeting at six. Treat's on me.

Sheldon Waters: I can do that. Next Wednesday?

Everyone: Agree.

Brent Anderson: Everyone like chicken?

friday, april 19th, 2007, 7:30 p.m.

The *MorLord Worship Band* practice Friday evenings in the church sanctuary, using some of the church's instruments, some their own. Every spring a group of talented teens commit themselves to a season of music ministry, lasting into autumn. The group was well acquainted with each other, everyone having attended the *Center* for years. Ministry can consist of Sunday evening services at various churches within a hundred mile range, mostly south of the border, occasional Sunday mornings at the *Center,* and perhaps a youth convention somewhere within the denomination. This year the focus is on the city's summer festival; they had been invited as the festival's main performance on Saturday night. Never in the history of the band has such an honor been given. This evening is the season's first practice, the time when the group chooses for themselves a band captain and lead vocalist.

This is John Tanner's second year, as well as Marie Schierling's. It is Todd Anderson's third year, the two previous he was support vocalist, and he is hopeful of being chosen lead vocalist. Katie Maclin, too, was support vocalist last year and nothing but lead would be satisfactory.

Katie knew her only rival was Todd. Not that Tanya Borric wasn't at least equally talented, but Katie just knew she was not a threat. Todd had leverage. He is the son of the wealthiest man in the congregation; money is power. And more, he is the oldest in the group, he had the most seniority, he owned a classy car, and he was a male; males were preferred leaders. But Katie had leverage too. Being the pastor's daughter was far more potent than being the son of wealth. She could always depend on the support of her twin brother, and Karla Morgan, who had eyes on her brother, would surely vote the way Kyle voted. And Katie was more accomplished than Todd at creating her own leverage.

No one taught Katie how to generate leverage; she was a natural. Enthusiasm and admiration for others, she learned at a young age, were strategic. Enthusiasm and admiration are the magnets that make her magnetic …… and most would pay a high price to be admired by a magnetic person …… and this made her wanted …… and a wanted person has leverage over the less wanted.

Katie was the ray of sunshine in an ill lit room, the fresh breeze in a musty day, a bundle of spinning zest spinning off excitement to those blessed to have her company. Sometimes. The art was in the timing and selection. Payment was required for enthusiasm and admiration to flow; withheld, they would stop. She did not admire indiscriminately, a return expected. Those familiar with her knew how quickly warm could become frosty. The subtle message was: *Make me happy and I will light up*

your life. Do what I please and I will not only accept you, I will admire *you. Upset me and I will turn off the tap, and you will feel my rejection.*

Marie was thrilled and surprised to be invited to go shopping with Katie earlier in the day. Seldom had she felt so accepted, even admired, as during those happy, giggly afternoon hours. Hungry for more, she would do much to keep the effervescence flowing in her direction. Mark the drummer enjoyed Katie's fuss over his drum set. *How long have you been practicing? Did you always want to be a drummer? You seem to be a natural. Show me how you hold the drumsticks.* Todd got less attention then the others and felt excluded, not sure why.

Kyle informed the group Pastor Phil would be along shortly. "Should we get started by practicing a worship song we are all familiar with? Let's do *Jesus, You Are Awesome*. Maybe Katie could do lead on this one." Being first practice they struggled to synchronize their instruments and voices.

Pastor Phil entered the sanctuary, and got right down to business. "As you know you were each chosen, not on your skills alone, but on your perceived ability to flow together in unison. As Pastor Mac says, a band calls for team play. Mostly, you will govern yourselves, this to help you prepare for future ministry. I will be here as consultant when needed, and I will consult with Pastor Mac if necessary. The person you choose to be band captain will be a liaison between me and the band.

"You must also choose a lead vocalist. The lead will have the responsibility of working with the captain to coordinate the band, making it all flow together. Also the lead will be the one communicating with the audience. I would suggest you get to work. There are only a few practices between now and your first performance.

"Remember what Pastor Mac has often said, in every ministry there is give and take. Hopefully, there will be a spirit of submissiveness and compromise. Selection next year will be dependent on your willingness to submit to one another in an attitude of humility." And then Pastor Phil was gone.

"I think the first order of business is to choose a captain," Kyle said immediately after Phil's departure. "John, you and I talked, and I understand you do not want the job."

"That's right. Thanks, but no thanks."

After an awkward silence someone nominated Kyle.

"Yes, come on Kyle!" Katie exclaimed exuberantly. "You would make a *great* team captain!"

"Okay, I accept. Any other nominations?"

John thought of saying, *Todd, how about you? You have more experience than the rest of us.* But the words, words his friend Kyle would not like to hear and words Katie would not approve, stayed in his mouth. Todd was prepared to answer in the negative if he were nominated for team captain, which he expected to be, and explain that since he was hoping to be voted lead vocalist, he could not do both. Yes, that would be brazen, but he wanted lead, and honestly felt himself best qualified. But

silence. Each had his/her reason for not nominating an obvious consideration.

"Looks like you're the man, bro!" Katie broke the silence a little too quickly.

Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap.

"Thanks everyone. I will try not to let you guys down.

"I guess the first order of business will be to choose the lead vocalist. This person will more than anyone else determine the success of band ministry. We have four talented vocalists, but talent is not the only consideration. Who is most able to effectively communicate with the audience? Who can pull us together as a team, and make it all happen?"

All the time Katie was wearing her very sweet smile, aglow with expectation. Karla was not a consideration, Tanya had no expectation whatsoever, Todd was feeling squeezed out.

Marie Schierling did not hesitate. "I nominate Katie Maclin."

"Thank you, Marie!" Katie gave Marie an enthusiastic hug. No one had to ask if she were willing to accept the nomination.

Again John felt convicted to speak out, but did not. John knew Todd was good, very good, and was about to be overlooked, for what reason he wasn't sure. *I think we should seek outside help on this one,* John didn't say. *There are people in our assembly qualified to judge who of the four, Karla, Tanya, Katie, or Todd, could best communicate the love of Christ in song.* And he continued to not say, *I for one find it difficult to choose among friends and I suspect others here feel equally awkward.* John kept his silence and so did the others.

"I guess you are lead vocalist of the *MorLord Worship Band,* sis!" Kyle said to his sister.

Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap.

Katie was noticeably moved, her light shone even brighter. "Now what say we get to work?" she said at last.

John found solace in his violin, playing lightly so as not to overpower, just enough to accent the other sounds. *Was it coincidental,* he dared ask himself, *that the pastor's son was selected captain and the pastor's daughter the lead with not so much as a vote required? Perhaps,* John reasoned, *it is best this way. Kyle is preparing for full time ministry and the experience will be good for him. And certainly life will be much more pleasant with Katie-the-winner than Katie-the-loser.*

John Douglas Tanner was learning to be a team player. Give and take. Compromise would come easier after this evening.

Expediency had won out over right, and Todd was its victim. Katie was now free to pour her admiration and kindness upon Todd and would start doing so immediately; the band required his

cooperation. Todd would suppress his wound, even deny having one, but bitterness from the betrayal would occasionally leak out of his life.

"Okay guys," Katie instructed, "let's pick up the tempo. Mark, a little less, no a *lot* less, drum."

sunday, june 16th, 1990, 6:35 p.m.

Jeni loved Sunday mornings; it was when she attended the service at the *Center.* Jeni hated Sunday afternoons; it was the time she spent at home with her husband.

A man with a temper would have been easier to live with then a cynic. Temper tantrums pass; cynicism is an attitude, uninterrupted, droning, grating.

Reuben on the phone talking to a neighbor: "Those sons-o'-bitches…… on city council don't know what they're talking about…… why bypass our city with the new highway?…… why not bring business to town?…… why don't they hire local contractors to do the work?…… they are probably collecting under the table…… crooks, the whole lot of them…… blah, blah, blah, blah……"

Reuben on the phone with a customer: "Their price may be a bit lower, but you should see their work…… how many times I've gotten complaints about their shabby workmanship…… they get apprentices to do the work of a journeyman so they can save a few bucks…… will they ever soak you if there are extras…… don't expect them to show up on time…… blah, blah, blah, blah……"

Reuben at the supper table: "I did some work the other day for some guy who calls himself a Christian…… they are the cheapest sons-o'-bitches…… I have come across…… *how much is this going to cost me?* he asks…… *don't know until I finish,* I told him…… *if you would have called me in the first place instead of installing this tub yourself it wouldn't have leaked and messed up your floor*…… blah, blah, blah, blah ……"

Her husband grudgingly, very grudgingly, attended services at the *Center* twice a month for no other reason than to play baseball - Reuben loved baseball. She hoped he would be influenced by the men at church and on the baseball team; that didn't seem to be happening. She tried to offset his sarcasm with cheeriness; it seemed to make him worse.

Reuben was in his recliner sipping an after-supper tea while staring into the flames in the living room fireplace, impatient for Jeni to join him so he would have someone to vent to. Jeni was with baby John Douglas getting him ready for bed. She was five months pregnant with number two child, a girl she secretly hoped. While dressing John she played their usual bedtime game. First she showed John a small doll. "Mommy," he said. "Right," Jeni replied softly, showing him another. "Daddy," John said. "Right again." After doing the dog and cat and several farm animals, she surprised the baby with a new toy monkey. John didn't know what this was, and Jeni enjoyed the suspense as John made a few wrong guesses. "Son-of-a-bitch," John guessed again.

Jeni was stunned. Her precious baby! She put him to bed, turned on the praise music Reuben hated,

and walked into the living room. She had never once snapped at her husband; it just wasn't in her. Even now in her fury she could say nothing. Reuben began his droning as soon as she entered the room. "You should have seen your Christian friends playing baseball…… never seen such a useless bunch…… the coach should stick to pastoring…… Maclin doesn't have a clue how to coach a team …… "

Sweet, petite, pregnant Jeni blew! She swung at the teacup, spilling hot tea on Reuben, the carpet, the furniture. Reuben jumped up, yelping from pain, frantically brushing hot tea off his pants, startled by the wild behavior of his normally subdued wife. He looked into her face for an explanation but all he could see was fury. She grabbed him by the shirt, lifting the big man off the floor, and *slammed* him into a log wall. "Come out of him *now* in the name of *Jesus!"* she screamed. Reuben was John's little daddy-doll in his wife's hands, his eyes huge and bulging, totally confounded. "I said come out of him *now* in the name of *Jesus!"* her voice full of rage and authority. She left the room leaving her husband limp on the floor, walked to her bedroom, dropped onto her bed, sobbed like a wounded child.

An hour later Jeni was herself again but Reuben was not, sitting motionless and silent in his chair, staring into space, ignoring the fresh tea Jeni placed in front of him. He was suddenly free from the tormenting spirit that had gripped him for almost two years. He couldn't believe his own behavior, and was paralyzed with shame and remorse and confusion. He could not look at the wife he once promised to cherish.

"Pastor Mac," Jeni's voice on the phone was urgent, "I know it's late, but……" And she explained the circumstance, fully blaming herself.

"Reuben," she softly spoke to her husband, "Pastor Mac is coming. He asked me to put the coffee on. He will know what to do."

No response. Jeni was scared. Never had she seen her husband like this. What has she done? She wrapped a blanket around his shoulders, stoked the fire, and prayed and waited for headlights to appear in the dark night. Reuben would not respond to her questions of concern but stared into the fire. Neither husband nor wife knew that the demon that was cast out was fighting to get back in. Mac was making a mockery of the speed signs, Vivian was out of bed praying on her knees, both sensing the gravity of the moment. Jeni was relieved to see the bobbing headlights racing towards the house. *Oh, I forgot the coffee!*

Mac put his hand on Reuben's broad shoulder and began to tell of his own conversion seven years previous. "That old man gave it to me straight," Mac said, remembering gray-haired Joshua, "and that's the way I'm going to give it to you. Tomorrow, the next day, or perhaps in a week that same filthy demon Jeni cast out of you will make its way back. You will be worse off, more sarcastic and cynical than before. You have one hope, and that is Jesus Christ."

Reuben had nothing to say in response. But he was all ears.

“Jesus Christ came to earth to set people free. He offers a new life, much better than the one you now have. If you repent of your sins and embrace the Lord Jesus Christ into your life He will make you a new person. You won’t be the same. You will become an adopted child of God.”

“What should I do, Mac……I mean, Pastor Mac?”

“Tell me straight, Reuben. Do you want Christ?”

“I want Christ.”

“Sincerely?”

“Sincerely.”

“The Bible says, 'Believe and be baptized'. Would you be willing to be baptized in water before a group of people as a profession of your faith in Christ?”

“Yes, I would.”

“Then pray with me.” And together they prayed Reuben into the kingdom of God.

“You'll be at practice?” Mac asked as he was leaving.

“I’ll be there.” Reuben had a relaxed smile on his face.

Together Reuben and Jeni watched their visitor make the drive to the main road. Alone now, they turned to look at each other in the eye, the first time in almost two years.

saturday afternoon, april 20th, 2007

Trevor Kenny was about to test his plan to end his life. It must work without a hitch; his family must not ever know of his suicide or they might feel responsible. The last thing his precious Sally and his precious kids needed was another burden to shoulder the rest of their lives. He had been planning this for three months, ever since Sally informed him of her decision to move to an eastern state, never to return.

Tree lived in a rented, secluded cabin on the outskirts of River’s Bend where he worked and lived all of his life except the three years as a marine. After their separation he signed over all their possessions to Sally, the house and furniture and car, as well as their life savings. Sally protested, but Tree was insistent. The divorce was recently finalized and Sally decided to start life over somewhere else. She hoped the move from Tree’s depression and addictions would better the children’s chances of an acceptable adult life. Maybe, in time, the sadness would go. They might even learn to laugh.

Tree loved his wife and children and Mac, and hated himself and God. He blamed the God Mac believed in for his many woes and those of his family. God could have rescued them, steered them away from calamity, but was quite content to let misfortune do its nasty work. His self-hate was

destroying what remained of his life, making him an emotional invalid, more harmful than good to the ones he loved. And yet he needed them. He needed them nearby. He needed the hope that maybe one of them might phone, invite him for a birthday celebration, ask his advice. The will to live would go with their departure, and Tree refused to live one day thereafter.

Tree and Sally had agreed how they would all say their final good-byes. In three weeks on a Sunday morning they would meet in a park on the east side of the city. Sally would have the minivan packed for their three-day journey. After their good-byes Sally and the kids would jump in the van and be gone from Tree's life. Forever.

Only Tree knew the rest of his plan for that day.

Tree would have his F150 packed for a fishing trip, and immediately head to a river in the hills where trout came down from the high-up lakes in Canada. He had arranged for his three-week vacation to begin the Monday following his family's parting, so no one would miss him for a long time. After parking his pickup at a hunter/fishing camp, as he sometimes did, he would hike a mile through the bush to the turbulent river. After catching a fish or two he would place his rod and equipment and jacket at the top of a steep bank, with the remainder of a six-pack of beer on the ground, and then hike the five miles downhill back home to his cabin, staying off the roads, careful not to be seen. When they finally did a search everyone would conclude that poor sloshed Tree slipped off the edge and drowned in the river. When he got back to his cabin he would bury himself in a four-foot deep grave. Perhaps, he mused, someone would find his bones in fifty years or so and think it was a buried Indian.

Today he was testing what he thought was a rather ingenious idea.

Tree had brought home from the glass plant a wooden packing crate just the right size - six feet long, three feet wide, four feet high. He dug his grave the exact same measurements. He had a collection of flawed safety glass he had taken home from the plant, thinking he would one day enclose the porch, and chose a large glass plate that would just barely cover the hole. This safety glass was incredibly strong but when pierced it would disintegrate into thousands of tiny rounded chunks.

After removing the top and bottom from the crate he placed it on top of the glass, over the hole. Next he shoveled the dirt from the grave into the crate, topping it with sod, and yes, the glass held, just as he thought. He even climbed on top of the filled box to test it further, and it still did not break. So far so good. Next he fired his pistol at the edge of the glass. The entire plate immediately disintegrated, the dirt shot out of the box into the grave in less than a second. Perfect! All that a passerby would see was an old crate in the middle of the yard.

In three weeks he would do it all over again, but this time he would crawl under the glass, and after positioning himself, shoot the glass from inside his grave. The weight of the dirt would pin him so he couldn't dig himself out if he wanted to. He guessed he would be unconscious in about two minutes,

and dead in about five.

But that was three weeks from now. He still had games to play, beer to drink, serious hating to do.

tuesday, april 24th, 2007, 4:45 p.m.

Alone in the sanctuary, sure no one would happen by at this late afternoon hour, Phil Ferguson leaned on the pulpit, his Bible and notebook opened in front of him, and imagined himself preaching a Sunday morning service. Mac had indicated that after the conference Phil would get his first chance, and, "barring any complications" would speak at regular intervals.

Phil knew what "barring any complications" meant: the congregation didn't fall asleep; he didn't stray from denominational doctrine; he was able to communicate effectively. He must be good; his future as a pastor was linked to the pulpit.

Phil was confident. As a salesman he had learned how to steer people, push the right buttons. As well, he had been coached at Bible school, and over the years had studied ministers who possessed what some term *pulpit presence*, a poise emitting confidence and demanding attentiveness. His first encounter with the pulpit might be scary but he had a strategy. He would pretend, convince himself, he had done this many times before, and present himself a casual veteran. The key was confidence. People wanted a strong leader, had little respect for a wuss. Speak with conviction, and occasionally, not too often, with passion. Be in control. Never show fear or lack of confidence. Phil was determined to master the trade of oratory the same as Nelson Chesney mastered accounting, same as Tony Borric mastered carpentry, same as Reuben Tanner mastered plumbing.

Tanner! The audacity of the man! What does this layman, - a plumber! *an* usher! - *think he could add to Mac's ministry? No credentials, never been to Bible school, never even taught a Sunday school class as far as I know.* Phil would be thoroughly slighted if Reuben managed to muscle his way to the pulpit before him. But no, the board would never approve such a thing, of that he was sure.

Phil enjoyed being assistant pastor of *Bryden Falls Community Christian Center,* even though he was not yet full-time. He graduated from seminary older than most. Before school he had nicely supported his young family of four as a car salesman but he wanted more out of life than convincing people to buy cars and minivans and pickups; he wanted to affect lives, be heard. He wanted to matter. So he invested two years in ministry preparation, selling on the side, tough slugging for sure, but here he was, doing something relevant, being part of a church team.

He must be patient. Now he was little more than an add-on, a trainee. Sure, they called him *Pastor* Phil, but they didn't really consider him their shepherd. The pulpit would change that. Respect would increase with every speaking engagement. But he had to be good. Mac was a tough act to follow; he definitely had pulpit presence. So Phil must do as well, or at least come a close second, or he would appear inept; the congregation would tolerate rather than value him.

Phil needed Mac's approval. He would have no hope of going from part to full time without it. Should

he ever apply for a position elsewhere, a glowing recommendation from Mac would be essential. Making the senior pastor happy was always a consideration in everything he did at the *Center,* although he would never admit, even to himself, such an unspiritual motive. When he addressed the *MorLord Worship Band* in an unusual businesslike manner just before they were about to decide who would be their team captain and lead vocalist he was subconsciously pushing the kid's buttons, subconsciously putting them on edge, subconsciously wanting to make Mac happy. *Did we do something wrong?* the band might wonder. *What can we do to make Pastor Phil his cheery self again?* Phil had given them the answer in code, mentioning Pastor Mac's name three times. But would they get it? You make Pastor Phil happy by making Pastor Mac happy by making Pastor Mac's kids happy.

Nothing illicit was premeditated. It was an unrehearsed subliminal action of one wanting to succeed. Same as Kyle and Katie inviting only the band to their eighteenth birthday celebration - just a nice thing to do, nothing whatsoever to do with the election of captain and lead two weeks following. And Katie inviting Marie to shop with her the morning they were to choose lead vocalist? - just wanting to bless a friend and deepen their friendship, that's all. Nobody in the band would admit, or even realize, they were influenced; Kyle and Katie were simply their choice. When Kyle shared his good news with Pastor Phil during a break, Phil was much pleased and decided to bless the band with pizza and pop after the practice. Not a reward, just a nice thing to do.

Church politics is a subtle thing. The heart, who can understand it?

In his imagination the church was full of attentive listeners. His eyes swayed left to right, and back to the left. There in the third row was his wife, smiling and supportive. Over to the left was Donald Williamson with his equally grim wife, both expressionless. Mac and Vivian sat in the front row, respectfully attentive; it would be difficult to make the occasional eye contact with them, but he must. Teenagers sat in groups in the back seats; hope they don't get restless. The *Amen!* choir, Nelson Chesney and Tony Borric and several others, would keep him fired up.

Alone in the sanctuary, he wanted to preach out loud but dared not, fearing someone might hear and think him a nut. *I can do this,* he assured himself. He would have to.

tuesday, april 24th, 2007, 4:45 p.m.

Jeni Tanner managed to get to the phone before it stopped ringing, having hurried from the porch where she was watering the many flowers hanging from the railings and porch roof.

"Hello."

"Yes, this is Jeni Tanner."

"Yes, my husband plays baseball for the *Challengers."*

"Sally! Of course I remember you! I am so glad you phoned."

"Oh, you don't have to apologize. I understand. I was afraid I might have come on too strong. I was so

excited to meet you."

"Yes, his hand is just fine. He had a bruise but that's gone now."

"No, don't be embarrassed."

"Yes, Reuben and I still pray for you and Trevor every day. We will never stop."

"I am sorry to hear that. When will you be leaving?"

"That soon?"

"I understand."

"Oh, you don't have to thank me. And yes, we will never stop praying."

"Sally, I thank you for phoning. I wish you well. May God protect you and the kids on the road."

"Good-bye Sally. Oh, Sally?"

"You are not leaving for three weeks. May I phone you between now and then? I really want to get to know you even if it's only over the phone."

"Just a minute while I find a pen. Okay, go ahead."

"Yes, I got it. What's a good time to phone?"

"Yes, I get up early too."

"Yes, six-thirty in the morning would work fine."

"Can I phone you tomorrow morning?"

"No, Sally, I wouldn't consider reversing the charges."

"Believe me, your friendship is worth much more than a few dollars. Besides, we have a long distance plan. We pay a monthly fee so there is no extra cost for calls before eight in the morning and after six at night."

"Yes, Sally, I look forward to it, too."

"Bye for now. God bless you."

Jeni was thrilled Sally Kenny had phoned but disturbed at the thought of her leaving the vicinity. She wanted to share the news with Reuben alone in his office but decided not to disturb him, sure he was praying. She was glad Vivian had mistakenly revealed Reuben's request to speak to the congregation. Vivian was surprised Reuben did not share this important matter with his wife, and Jeni was also perplexed. He would tell her in his time, she was sure. Meanwhile, she would support her husband in prayer, knowing Reuben had never spoken before a large group and did not seem to

be a gifted communicator. Jeni had no idea what message Reuben thought he had for the congregation.

tuesday, april 24th, 2007, 5:15 p.m.

Reuben was spending more and more alone time in his office, an attachment he made at the end of the log house after their fifth was born. He could have heated it electrically, power had been provided to their property many years ago, but instead Reuben had built a rock fireplace. He never tired of trips into the woods, cutting and hauling and stacking firewood, starting and tending a fire. With a fireplace at both ends of the house only a minimum amount of electrical power was required to keep the house comfy.

The office was much more than an office. It was a study, prayer room, getaway, a place to sort out life's many complications. Two large skylights combined with large windows to brighten the room. Reuben spent thousands of hours here in his favorite chair, a rocker he made himself, facing the fireplace, sometimes staring into a crackling fire, praying, reading or just thinking about this and that. The mounting of a heavy door, heavy for soundproofing against the sounds of five children, separating the office from the rest of the house was the final touch to the construction of his office. It took him only a few days to reconsider; he didn't want to close himself from his family. The door removed, now there were only hinges in the doorway.

Reuben was laden with a problem few plumbers could identify with. He had no disposition for public speaking. He was a husband, a father, a plumber. That was enough. He had no need for a pulpit. Standing before the congregation would be like an insecure child being dropped off at school for the first time, entering an alien world, alone in the midst of many. How delighted he would be if the board refused him permission. *I tried, I was obedient, but it didn't work out,* he could say to the Lord. But that wouldn't happen. He would preach, all right. Ouch!

When a year younger than his eldest was today, he had to give a speech before his high school class. He had to be good, at least okay, couldn't make a fool of himself in front of Jeni and the others. Standing there, reading from his note pad, not daring to look up, he started rocking! Involuntarily his weight shifted back and forth from his heels to his toes, and up and down he went. The class was unable to restrain their giggling, which caused him to rock faster. Unable to brake himself, he sat down at his desk in the middle of his talk, and vowed to never speak in public. No way, never again, un-unh.

Reuben fervently prayed the elders on the board would make the decision he didn't want them to make. Reuben loved Mac and the others on the board, even crusty Donald Williamson grew on him over the years. However, most seemed to lack conviction, content to be *yes* men, David Tomas, who occasionally attended the Wednesday night gathering at the Tanners, a possible exception. He prayed the Lord would give the men spiritual backbone, knowing they were accountable to God.

Vivian's voice seemed less than friendly on Reuben's cell phone recorder when she relayed the

message that the board had not yet made a decision and would reconvene in one week. Was her tone an indication of trouble to come? Regardless, when the board reconvened he would be interceding.

tuesday, april 24th, 2007, 5:15 p.m.

Terry Maclin noticed Phil's car leaving the church parking lot a few seconds before he drove in. *Phil worked late today,* he said to himself as he parked his car. He headed straight for the sanctuary as he often did when he had serious pondering to do. Soon the board would put on him the burden of making a decision regarding Reuben's request, asking he take into consideration their lengthy discussion. Mac was between a rock and a hard place. The board was split, a rare happening, so some would be troubled no matter what decision he made.

Leaning on the pulpit he noticed Phil's notebook and knew immediately Phil was standing in this very spot a few minutes previous, imagining himself preaching to the congregation. He knew because he had done the same thing many times in his younger years. Smiling, he found no fault in playing pulpit. Did not the football player many times imagine himself catching a touchdown pass at the last second to win the championship game? Didn't every real estate agent win a diploma, in his/her imagination, as the year's best salesperson? Had he not envisioned himself competently preaching to his colleagues and superiors at the upcoming conference, attired in his best suit, the envy of other ministers?

Funny, he thought to himself, w*e are having a major debate whether to let Reuben preach but no one questions Phil's right to the pulpit. Of the two*, Mac asked himself, *whom would I turn to for advice? Reuben. With whom would I most likely share the secrets of my heart? Reuben. With whom would I most trust with my life and those of my family? Reuben.* And then he asked himself, *Of the two, to whom would I entrust the pulpit?* The answer wouldn't come.

Phil was predictable; Reuben was not. Phil was a team player; Reuben was independent. Phil was accountable to him; Reuben gave account to no one. And there was more.

Phil tithed; Reuben did not. Yes, he was generous with his time. Yes, he always had something for the collection plate. But Mac, quite informed of everyone's financial contributions, knew Reuben stopped giving ten percent to the *Center* years ago. Mac knew of the power of the pulpit, how it magnified its speaker and attracted people to him in an unreasonable way. Phil or Reuben, the influence of both would increase relative to pulpit exposure, their opinions would matter the more. Does Mac really want a non-tither to be influential in a church that depended heavily on tithes to maintain itself?

Phil was a bit immature but teachable, Mac thought to himself. If he ever got the opportunity he would tell him that the secret to successful pulpit ministry was not in a swagger or a method but simply to love the people he taught. Before surrendering the pulpit he wanted Phil to hear his *Pulpit Power* message at the conference; perhaps he would learn from it.

Mac loved his people. He loved them as a shepherd, a good shepherd, loves his sheep. Mac was hired but he was not a hireling. He often carried their burdens, and would not hesitate to protect them with his life. Certainly he must be cautious whom he allowed behind his pulpit. He knew he was accountable to his superiors but a good account was not his prime motive for service. He ached for a good outcome for the peoples' lives, wanting them to be rich in good works.

How are they doing? was a painful question he seldom asked himself lately. It was not like the old days. Church enthusiasm, though certainly not extinguished, was not as was. The breeze was no longer fresh, the bread was getting crusty, the old man's shoulders were stooped. And Mac was frustrated. Had he not preached with unpretentious passion, reproving and encouraging and directing, and even scolding when scolding was due? Did he not set an example of selfless service, outworking everyone? Was there any other church in the community that worked as hard, did so much? And was he not always in the forefront, leading and setting the example?

They had come far, but progress had stopped years ago. Their numbers hadn't dropped but only by the force of his strong will. He always felt like he was in the ninth inning, his energy sapped.

And now the Reuben Tanner problem. Didn't need this.

Reuben, Reuben, Reuben, he thought. *What are you up to?* What motivated his strange request? A need to be heard, a need for the spotlight? What could he possibly have to say that Mac hadn't said many times? What subject had Mac not thoroughly covered? Did Reuben want to vent his understanding on tithing? Church structure, perhaps? End-time revelation? Why would he require *two* Sundays?

And what would he do if his request were denied? What *could* he do? Any attempt to reach the people without the blessing of the board would call for a heavy reprisal. If Reuben wanted a fight he would get it, but the consequence would be awful; the entire church could be injured. The problem with Reuben was that he was so popular. He and his family were loved and appreciated. The Tanners were a pillar in the church community, have been for years, and church life would be poorer without them. Mac must be sensitive; congregations have been permanently split over less critical issues. Already the board was divided.

The board. Mac was surprised, yes, he had to admit, impressed, by the board of elders. They were different somehow; they were acting like..... like *men*. David Tomas shook them all with his suggestion that they close the Bible decorating the boardroom table. *Let us not give allegiance to man while pretending to give allegiance to God's Word,* he declared with unfamiliar boldness. But was he right? Did he have God's perspective on the matter? Did the Lord really care how men ran the church as long as His principles were not violated? And *were* those principles violated? So many questions Mac had never asked before. He attended Bible school with the premise that they knew and he didn't, they being the teachers, he the student. That premise he carried through school and into the *Center,* passing it on to his people. Never before had it been challenged. Not until David

Tomas suggested they close the Bible. Still his confidence in those above, though shaken, was still firm. Perhaps he should settle the matter by simply phoning Martin Johnston, the superintendent.

Sir, I have a few questions regarding the structure of our denomination, he imagined himself saying. *Some of the boys on the board wanted to know how solidly we stood on the Bible, this in regard to the way we run our churches. Can you help us out?*

Terry! I am delighted you asked! Mac could *not* imagine the superintendent replying. *I would be more than pleased to answer any questions you have.*

Mac knew instinctively such forthrightness would jeopardize his future. He thought he had a chance to be seated in the superintendent's chair some day. Secretly, he hoped his chances would be enhanced by his message at the conference. He didn't want to blow away his hopes by asking questions that would cast doubt on his loyalty.

He had read Johnston's book, *Building A Church On Wisdom's Foundation,* years ago and credited the growth of the *Center* to its insights. *No,* Mac concluded, *I must not do anything stupid. No boat rocking. No hero stuff. Go with the flow. God has everything under control.*

Church politics is a subtle thing. The heart, who can understand it?

CHAPTER FOUR

wednesday, april 25th, 2007, 4:00 p .m.

It was a hurried week since they last gathered, filling spare time considering their last, most unusual meeting and the ticklish matter before them. Mac considered using the pulpit Sunday morning to steer the elders in a particular direction but an honest heart restrained him. He did have hopes, however, his ongoing teaching on the Holy Spirit would cause them to depend on God for guidance. They were dealing with a sensitive issue, the welfare of the *Center* at stake, and would require Holy Ghost discernment.

Terry Maclin: I trust everybody had an okay week since our last meeting. I would like to caution the board if we lose unity among ourselves division will spread throughout the congregation we have agreed to protect and serve. In saying that, however, I am not implying we do not speak freely and openly. We must remember tolerance. Tolerance will help us stay together. If we do not agree with what is said we tolerate the speaker and respect his right to an opinion.

Everyone: I agree! Amen!

Donald Williamson: I am the least tolerant man in this room. Don't expect a miracle but I will try to be more sensitive of the opinions of others.

David Tomas: And I will try to be less dramatic.

Everyone: Soft laughter.

Terry Maclin: Sheldon?

Sheldon Waters: Thank you, Pastor. It seems we have two interlinking issues before us. First, the matter of church administration, or to put it more simply, the way we run the church. Is it really as biblical as we have all assumed? If not, is it really that important? And if so, what do we do about it, if anything?

And second, the matter of Reuben Tanner, a man whom I believe has the respect of everyone at the *Center.* Do we permit him to speak to the congregation or deny him permission? Can we agree to tackle these issues one at a time?

Everyone: I agree.

Sheldon Waters: Good. First, church administration. I have a further suggestion. Since we have had time to consider the matter seriously, I propose we each make a short statement about our conclusions so far. When we are finished we can question each other, or confirm or challenge what is said.

Everyone: I agree.

Sheldon Waters: Good. Let's go around the table. You first, Donald.

Donald Williamson: The Bible teaches us we can know the value of something by its fruit. A good tree bears good fruit, a bad tree bad fruit. I say the fruit has been good. I am referring to the way most denominations carry out church business. If the fruit had not been good it would not have survived so many centuries. I have been active in our denomination for close to sixty years. I have seen hundreds come to various altars to receive salvation. I have seen many families put back together again. People have been established in the Word. All good fruit. To put it another way, if it works don't fix it!

Some others: Amen.

Phil Ferguson: I agree with Donald. Yes, there are always improvements to be made; our denomination consists of imperfect people, and nothing we do will be perfect. But we should not be overly zealous to make changes. To do so, we risk tearing down rather than building up.

Nelson Chesney: I have often heard, and have repeated many times myself, the expression, "God has everything under control." And I believe it. I have to believe behind the scenes is a sovereign God controlling the affairs of men. Though I may not always understand I trust things are working out according to plan, His plan, in our church and our denomination and every other evangelical denomination.

Shaun Edwards: I was thoroughly challenged last week when David implied we should close the

Bible if we do not intend to obey it. I have spent every spare moment, sometimes sitting up past midnight, searching the New Testament for clues how a church should be governed. David, do not be apologetic for being demonstrative. For me, it was a wake-up call. I have been guilty of presumption. It is still not fully clear to me how a local church should be managed but I have made the unpleasant discovery that there seems to be little similarity between the way we do things and the New Testament. Other religions choose tradition over the Word. Let us not make the same mistake.

Some: Amen.

Brent Anderson: I am still shaken by this entire matter. Frankly, I have nothing to say, not yet.

Tony Borric: The call of Christians is a call to obedience. "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of lambs." How do we obey God? Pastor Mac has said many times we obey God by obeying the Bible and the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth. One more point. We are not allowed to do collectively what is forbidden as individuals. Let me explain. As an individual I am obliged to obey the Bible as I understand it. But somehow that principle is lessened when individuals become a group; we can be less diligent as a church in checking to see if the way we do things are in accord to God's Word. To put it bluntly, and I hope no one takes offense, disobedience is tolerated as long as we are disobedient together.

Some: Amen!

David Tomas: Jesus once said, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?" As elders, we should be scrupulous to set an example of obedience.

Sheldon Waters: I said it last week and I say it again: I find this a very fascinating subject. I remind myself there is not, and never will be, a perfect church. Should we be spending our time and energy doing the best we can with what we have, or risk being diverted by trying to make improvements? For now, I have more questions than answers.

Terry Maclin: Frankly, I don't think anyone here is an authority on the subject of biblical church administration, myself included. But let's look at the overall picture. I am a licensed and ordained minister of our denomination and as such have agreed to abide by denominational bylaws and policies. Pastor Phil is also licensed though not yet ordained. Please understand I am committed to head office and the standard they have set. When each of you agreed to serve as elders it was assumed you were also agreeing to that same standard. Sheldon, back to you.

Sheldon Waters: Thank you, Pastor. Now I am sure there are questions to throw back and forth. Anyone?

Tony Borric: Donald, you said, "If it works don't fix it." I wonder if it is working all that well. Why do Christians seem to agree that most evangelical churches are in constant need of revival?

Donald Williamson: The fruit is either good or bad. What do *you* think it is? I say it is good fruit.

Tony Borric: I would have to say it is a mixture.

Donald Williamson: How could that be? The tree is either a good tree or a bad tree. There is no such thing as a good-bad tree.

Tony Borric: I don't think it's that simple. As a Christian I have produced both good fruit and bad. I would say it like this: Inside me are two trees, a good and a bad, one wanting to produce pleasant fruit, the other distasteful. The same is true of every Christian and, I believe, every denomination.

Brent Anderson: Shaun, you have suggested there are discrepancies between the Bible and the way we do things.

Shaun Edwards: There seems to be. We have already mentioned two. First, the word *layman* is not a biblical term. Second, we use the word *pastor* often, a word the New Testament uses but once, an indication, I think, we are not in tune with Scripture.

Phil Ferguson: But you are speaking of a technicality. As I said before, in the earliest church there were those who gave leadership and those who were being shepherded, those who were pastors and those who were sheep. What terms we use to describe these two groups is inconsequential.

Shaun Edwards: Yes, you made that point before Pastor Phil, and I heard you. Since that time I have come to disagree. Please hear me. Today we have a few that are given an *official* capacity to rule over many. Such a practice cannot be found in the New Testament.

Donald Williamson: Official? That's splitting hairs!

Shaun Edwards: I think not. In the New Testament church no person was forbidden to give leadership. Everyone was allowed equal say, that is, everyone was allowed to speak the truths of God. And everyone had the responsibility to judge for himself the validity of what was said. No person had an official capacity over another.

Donald Williamson: But there were appointed elders. How official can you get?

Shaun Edwards: The appointed elders were to lead *by example.* They did not have an endorsed authority over anyone. Their authority was limited to speaking the authoritative truths of God. Undoubtedly, the elders were more vocal than the others simply because they were more founded in truth. But no one was muzzled. The New Testament has much to say about speaking and ministering to *each other.* It seems to me God intends His church to be dependent on each other rather than the many being dependent on the few.

Donald Williamson: Sounds like anarchy!

Shaun Edwards: I have no comment about that. I simply attempted to answer Brent's question regarding discrepancies between us and the Bible.

Brent Anderson: Are there other discrepancies? Please say no.

Others: Light laughter.

Shaun Edwards: There are many. However, I would prefer not to go into that now.

Brent Anderson: You can't stop now. Let's hear it.

Shaun Edwards: Okay. I'll mention a few, but you better brace yourself.

Brent Anderson: Sounds bad.

Shaun Edwards: In the New Testament there is not found the schism we find today, the splitting of the church into two groups, the clergy (or ministerial) and the layman. There is no hint of denominationalism, no ecclesiastical hierarchy. There are no titles; even Paul was not titled. There was always a plurality of leadership, not a salaried pastor to do the entire work of the ministry. As a matter of fact, the New Testament church seemed to be ruled by *consensus;* Paul always made his appeal to the *entire* local church, never to a few individuals. And it is doubtful early church Christians tithed; there is not a single example of a Christian tithing or being so instructed. Though the people were encouraged to financially support those who ministered to them spiritually there was no such thing as a salary. We all know they didn't spend their money building and maintaining church buildings. Do you want to hear more?

Brent Anderson: No, I've heard enough!

Donald Williamson: Brent, keep in mind Shaun is merely expressing his opinions. Right Shaun?

Shaun Edwards: Correct.

Donald Williamson: For years, more years than Shaun, I have studied the same Bible and have come to far different conclusions.

Brent Anderson: That makes me feel better. I guess.

Sheldon Waters: I am not sure where we should go from here. Anyone?

David Tomas: I would like to comment on Nelson's remark, "God has everything under control." I used to say the same thing but no longer. God does *not* have everything under control.

Donald Williamson: Oh come on, Tomas! Are you disputing the sovereignty of God?

David Tomas: I am saying God is not a controller. He gave us a free will. If we say God has everything under control we are blaming Him for the mess this world is in.

Tony Borric: I think David is saying we cannot assume the way we do things in our church is necessarily the will of God. Something to think about.

Sheldon Waters: Very interesting. Now I would like to turn our attention to the realities that Pastor

Mac referred to. In fact, we *are* under the auspices of our denomination.

Phil Ferguson: I want everyone to understand my loyalty is with the denomination that licensed me and, hopefully, will one day ordain me.

Brent Anderson: Without saying so directly, I think Pastor Mac has implied the same.

Donald Williamson: Let's take a hard look at reality. If we stray from denominational policy we seriously risk losing Pastor Mac. Who needs to be reminded that Pastor Mac and Vivian were the force behind the founding of this church?

Nelson Chesney: The *Center* without Pastor Mac is unthinkable.

Brent Anderson: And if we happen to find someone equally competent we would be right back to where we are now.

Most: Amen!

Shaun Edwards: I propose since we cannot make changes locally we should pursue trying to make changes in our denomination.

Donald Williamson: I for one am far from convinced changes are necessary.

Sheldon Waters: I suggest we appoint a committee of three to study the matter, and if the committee concludes changes are beneficial we authorize them to approach head office.

Most: I agree.

David Tomas: How about you, Shaun? Will you serve on the committee?

Shaun Edwards: I will serve. And you, David? Will you work with me?

David Tomas: I would be honored.

Nelson Chesney: Tony, will you be the third man?

Tony Borric: I respectfully decline.

Shaun Edwards: Sheldon?

Sheldon Waters: I'm in.

Shaun Edwards: Pastor Mac, what are our chances of impacting the denomination?

Terry Maclin: Good, if you're patient. Changes come slow but they do come. I suggest you do not overwhelm head office with a load of suggestions but concentrate on one issue at a time, and be prepared to pursue the matter diligently.

Donald Williamson: And stay away from *tithes*.

Everyone: Light laughter.

Sheldon Waters: Let's take a vote. I propose a committee of three, Shaun, David, and myself, look into the matter of church administration and recommend changes we feel would be beneficial to the entire denomination. Until then, it's business as usual. Donald, you first.

Donald Williamson: It can't hurt. See, I am learning tolerance.

Everyone: Light laughter

Nelson Chesney: I agree. It's a compromise I can accept.

Shaun Edwards: I agree. What choice do we have?

Brent Anderson: I agree.

Tony Borric: I would like to be last. David?

David Tomas: I agree.

Sheldon Waters: I agree.

Terry Maclin: I agree. Back to you, Tony.

Tony Borric: Thank you, Pastor. Shaun mentioned how he was challenged when David suggested we either obey the Bible or close it. I, too, was impacted. I have had a rough week.

Donald Williamson: Not this again!

Sheldon Waters: Please continue, Tony.

Tony Borric: I am a finishing carpenter. A finishing carpenter is much more meticulous than a framing carpenter. Everything must be exactly square, exactly right, or it drives a finishing carpenter crazy. One time a customer paid me for a rather large china cabinet I had built for her, fully satisfied and appreciative. But I couldn't sleep that night because I knew what the lady did not - the cabinet was out of plumb. What could I do, tear it down and start over? I sent her a check for half the cost of the cabinet and explained in a letter why. Still, it bothered me that something I did was not true, not right, and does so until this day. Now I am trying to make you understand how I feel about the proposal Sheldon has made and which you are all in agreement. To me, it is out of square; it is not true. I understand your position, I certainly am not critical, but frankly, it is off plumb with the Bible and therefore with my conscience. I can't live with it. Therefore as of this moment I resign from the board of elders.

Terry Maclin: Tony, no! Take some time to reconsider!

Tony Borric: No, Pastor Mac. I have thought about this all week. I would like to say again if any man sees anger in me, or a judgmental attitude, he sees amiss. I am not critical towards anyone in this

room.

Donald Williamson: My God, man! Sometimes we have to compromise for the sake of unity! You know, give and take!

Brent Anderson: Tolerance! Isn't that what it's all about? Not having to have your own way?

Tony Borric: I thank you for your comments but I am determined. Since I am no longer a member of the board of elders you still retain unanimity. Please know I will always support you in prayer. Now before I leave there is one thing I must do.

Tony Borric stood up, every curious eye following his movements as he reached to the center of the table with both hands and gently closed the Bible. "There," he said, "now everything is on the square." No one protested. No one opened the Bible after Tony walked out. The Bible stayed closed until Vivian opened it again the following day, thinking someone had used it and forgot to re-open it. Mac went behind her and gently closed it again. *I have as many faults as most,* he thought to himself, *but I refuse to be a hypocrite.*

The delivery boy arrived late with the chicken. *Couldn't find the place,* he said. *Never delivered to a church before,* he said. *Couldn't find the right door,* he said. The fries were cold, coffee lukewarm, chicken greasy. The mood in the room shifted from buoyant to somber. Tony Borric's resignation was a serious blow. Most had already put in a full day and some had a commitment after the meeting. The dialogue was much less convivial.

Sheldon Waters: I think we should get on with the second issue of concern: Reuben Tanner.

Donald Williamson: One minute, Sheldon. First I have a question for David Tomas. Tomas, I want to know, are you with us or are you also going to be a quitter?

Shaun Edwards: You are calling Tony a quitter. I don't see him like that. He has served longer than any of us.

Donald Williamson: He quit before his term is up. He failed to live up to his commitment. In my estimate that makes him a quitter.

Shaun Edwards: I would be more kind than that. I would call him a conscientious dissenter.

Donald Williamson: Call him what you will. I think we should know where everyone stands.

Sheldon Waters: Let's go around the table. Do we stick together? Donald?

Donald Williamson: I'm no quitter.

Phil Ferguson: Of course.

Nelson Chesney: Ditto.

Shaun Edwards: I'm in……for now.

Brent Anderson: I'm here to stay.

David Tomas: For now I am in.

Sheldon Waters: I am most certainly in.

Terry Maclin: Everyone knows my position.

Sheldon Waters: Shall we move on?

Everyone: I agree.

Sheldon Waters: Reuben Tanner has appealed to us to reverse Pastor Mac's decision and allow him access to the pulpit two successive Sundays. Anyone?

Shaun Edwards: I am fully satisfied there is no biblical reason why Tanner cannot have access to the pulpit.

Donald Williamson: Then let's find another reason!

David Tomas: That's not right! Reuben appealed to us to make a judgment, not to look for a reason to say no.

Sheldon Waters: David, are you saying we should override Pastor Mac's decision?

David Tomas: I am saying we should give the matter fair consideration. To do less would make a mockery of our existence as a board.

Sheldon Waters: I think a fair question would be: Is Reuben competent to preach to the congregation? Personally, I don't know where he is at doctrinally.

Shaun Edwards: Good point, Sheldon. I for one do not want to be guilty of presumption again.

Donald Williamson: Since we cannot endorse him the matter is closed as far as I am concerned.

Others: Amen.

David Tomas: I endorse him.

Sheldon Waters: David, do you know something the rest of us don't know?

David Tomas: I know Reuben well. I have been attending his Wednesday evening gathering at the Tanner residence, whenever I can, for a year now.

Nelson Chesney: You mean a Bible study? I never knew Reuben was authorized to lead a Bible study. That puts a different light on the matter. Pastor Mac?

Terry Maclin: Reuben has never been authorized by the *Center* to lead a Bible study or prayer group.

He has never inquired. This is the first time I have heard about it. David?

David Tomas: It's not like that. Nothing official. Just Christians, neighbors mostly, getting together on Wednesday nights.

Donald Williamson: Are you a neighbor?

David Tomas: No.

Donald Williamson: Then you are endorsing it!

David Tomas: I am simply attending a gathering of saints.

Donald Williamson: You are making a statement by your attendance!

Nelson Chesney: I agree. As an elder you represent the *Center.* It could appear to people in the church that the *Center* is endorsing this Bible study…… or whatever it is.

Sheldon Waters: Perhaps we *should* endorse it.

Nelson Chesney: That's something to consider.

David Tomas: Gentlemen, I don't think Reuben *wants* our endorsement.

Donald Williamson: My Lord! Tanner doesn't want our endorsement, just our pulpit!

Sheldon Waters: Let's stay on track. Whether we agree David should or should not attend a…… what should I call it?…… an unofficial organized gathering of Christians, is a separate issue. The fact is there is one of us who *does* endorse Reuben Tanner.

Donald Williamson: But that's just one.

Nelson Chesney: I respect David's judgment.

Shaun Edwards: I agree. David is on this board because we respect his judgment.

Donald Williamson: I thought we all agreed that until changes came from head office it would remain business as usual. Allowing a layman to preach two consecutive Sundays is *not* business as usual.

Phil Ferguson: We *did* agree.

Shaun Edwards: I think we agreed to follow the policies of head office. Pastor Mac, is there a rule forbidding a layman to preach?

Terry Maclin: No. It is most unusual to allow a layman to preach to a congregation but there is nothing in writing to prevent it.

Donald Williamson: Pastor Mac, has there ever been an occasion whereby a layman requested to

preach to a congregation and permission was granted?

Terry Maclin: Not that I know of.

Shaun Edwards: Still, we could, if we so chose, give our permission without trespassing a denominational ruling.

Brent Anderson: I think there is something everyone is overlooking. What will happen if we say no? Will Tanner simply let the matter drop? Or will he try to reach the people by some other means?

Nelson Chesney: Excellent point, Brent. The man seems determined.

Donald Williamson: If he tried something he would face our wrath!

Brent Anderson: But that would bring serious division to the *Center.* People love the Tanners.

Donald Williamson: We cannot be intimidated! If Tanner wants a fight we will give it to him!

Sheldon Waters: David, you know Reuben. Would he accept our decision?

David Tomas: I don't know.

Sheldon Waters: Pastor Mac?

Terry Maclin: I don't know. I don't seem to have much influence on Reuben. Other than baseball, he is not what could be called a team player. That is why he has never been a consideration for this board or any other position of responsibility, other than usher. He did something most unusual by appealing to the board. He seems determined.

Phil Ferguson: He sounds like an independent, accountable to no one but himself.

David Tomas: There is still another matter for consideration. Perhaps God really does want Reuben Tanner to speak a word to the congregation.

Donald Williamson: Good Lord, Tomas! God doesn't work that way! God is orderly. If God wanted Tanner to preach He would have spoken to Pastor Mac. We shouldn't give any credence to a self-proclaimed prophet.

Some others: Amen.

Shaun Edwards: I am not so sure Reuben proclaims himself to be a prophet.

David Tomas: Nor I.

Donald Williamson: Gentlemen, I think we should seriously consider Romans 16:17. I memorized it years ago. "Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them." Over the years I occasionally witnessed someone rise up and challenge church authority and cause a stir in the assembly. The result was division and

emotional distress among the people. They are usually very subtle men who allege to have a special status with God, always professing to have the good of the assembly at heart. But after the damage is done it becomes obvious they were pawns of the devil!

David Tomas: Really, Mr. Williamson, all Reuben did was ask for our judgment on a matter.

Phil Ferguson: Think about it, David. Suppose the board reversed Pastor Mac's decision; don't you think Reuben realizes that could cause a serious rift between Pastor Mac and the board? And yet he petitions us to do that very thing.

Nelson Chesney: A good point.

Brent Anderson: All I know is that before Reuben made his appeal to us to reverse Pastor Mac's decision we were united. Since then Tony has resigned and the rest of us are nipping at each other.

Donald Williamson: How do you think Pastor Mac is going to explain Borric's resignation to the congregation? I tell you, we are going to see more division! Pastor Mac said if we lose our unity the division would spread into the assembly. Have you ever witnessed a church split? I have, and it isn't pretty.

Shaun Edwards: Let's look at it again. A man from our assemblage feels he has a message for us. He goes to the pastor and is declined. He takes a further step by appealing to the board. The man has done nothing wrong!

Donald Williamson: I didn't say he had malicious intent! I say he is *being used!*

Sheldon Waters: Brothers, I don't think we will ever come to a consensus on this matter. Would anyone argue that point?

Donald Williamson: I would never agree to allow Tanner access to the pulpit.

Sheldon Waters: I suggest we throw the matter back to Pastor Mac. Any disagreement?

Nelson Chesney: We tried but we seem to be going nowhere.

Sheldon Waters: Pastor Mac, I think I can speak for everyone when I say we highly respect your judgment and your integrity. We ask you to consider all that was said tonight and last week and come to a conclusion. We will back you up whichever way you decide. Does everyone agree?

Everyone: I agree.

saturday morning, april 28th, 2007

Weather permitting, the last Saturday in April always finds a large crew of volunteers from *Bryden Falls Community Christian Center* hard at work at *Bryden Falls Baseball Park* adjacent to the church property. Maintaining the park was a subtle means of affecting the community for God, an effort to reverse the negative attitude many have against Christians and the faith they profess. And it seemed

to work. Every year the local paper wrote a favorable article, usually accompanied by a large picture. Last year two small youngsters were featured, together carrying a large bag they were filling with scraps of litter.

Every year the handrails of the bleachers were painted a different, usually very bright, color. The seats were washed and bleached, the stairways and aisles swept and washed with a power washer. The washrooms were given a coat of paint from ceiling to floor, sinks and toilets were cleaned, repairs made where needed. The concession stand was also painted, inside and out, the refrigerators and stoves thoroughly cleansed, the tile floor scrubbed and polished. A ride-on sweeper was rented, at church expense, to sweep the paved parking lot. A crew worked on the baseball diamond, another worked on park grounds, pulling weeds, trimming trees and bushes, fertilizing, picking up garbage. The happy-face signs and the *Glad You Are Here* signs posted throughout the park were washed and polished.

Not only did they do the yearly sprucing but maintained the park throughout the year. Only cutting the grass was left to city workers. The *Center* long ago adopted a no tolerance policy regarding graffiti. Whenever graffiti was spotted it was reported to a volunteer group who immediately covered it with paint. Because of their diligence graffiti people expressed themselves elsewhere.

The number of volunteers was down the last few years, not the one hundred that used to come, but the crew was sizable nonetheless. Not far away in the church kitchen a dozen women were preparing the noon meal that would be carted to the park on a trailer pulled by a small garden tractor. The meal was actually a banquet, having evolved over the years from a simple picnic lunch to something quite sumptuous. Because of the many workers the project would be completed by early afternoon, and the men would bring out the horseshoes and baseball gloves, the women watching from the sideline. It was a Saturday of socializing and bonding and happy chatter.

Today was a magnificent spring day, not a cloud, bright and warm.

Kyle and Katie Maclin and John Tanner were raking and bagging last year leaves around the large elms at the far end of the park. Usually it was Kyle and John hanging out together, but today Kyle invited his sister to join them. And then: “I think Dad needs help unloading tables for the noon meal. Be back in a while.”

For the first time in their lives John and Katie were alone. They were both nervous, trying to say something funny as they worked the dead leaves and grass into plastic bags. The “little while” turned out to be an hour plus, and the time was used to explore, most delicately and most discreetly, the possibility of a relationship. The work slowed as they struggled to communicate their positions, their terms, while not appearing to do so. They had already realized their mutual attraction; now it was time to see if there was potential.

“Kyle tells me you may be going to the convention this year.”

"I *am* going. I left a message with your mom that I accepted your dad's invitation."

"Sounds exciting. Does that mean you are considering entering the ministry?"

"I really don't know. I am praying about it. I want to fulfill God's plan in my life whatever that is."

"Do you have a sense what that might be?"

"Well, a wife of course. Who I marry is more important than what I do. She must cherish God. She must love children. She must be willing to home school our children, same as I was. Hopefully she would acknowledge me as the head of the family under Christ."

Cherish God? No problem. And I sure love children. Home school? I don't know; sounds like a lot of work, but I guess I could do it. Submit to my husband? I could work on it.

"And you, Katie? What do see in your future?"

"A husband. Three children, a boy and two girls, the son being the oldest so he can look after his sisters the same as Kyle has looked after me. The son will be born two years after I am married, the first girl three years later and the second soon after so the sisters will be close to the same age."

John thought Katie was joking, the exactness of her dreams being so unrealistic, and laughed what he thought was an appropriate laugh.

"You are laughing!"

"Sorry, Katie! I thought I was supposed to..... I mean, I thought you were trying to be funny."

And then Katie realized the humor too, and laughed at her absurdity. "Little Freddie will grow to be six feet, two inches tall. Exactly." And they laughed the harder.

"Yes, and Martha will have blue eyes, blond hair and a dimple on her right cheek," John joined in. "I wonder what her shoe size will be."

"That's easy. Seven B, of course. I've got it all planned." Their nervousness was spent in loud laughter as they ventured deeper and deeper into the ridiculous and, finding it difficult to stand, sat together in the shade of an elm. "Molly, the youngest, will play piano, a very *large,* very *expensive* piano. Her favorite hymn will be *Amazing Grace*. She will always have flowers on her piano, yellow flowers; yellow is her preferred color, you know."

John gave Katie a chance to carry on the comedy. "And your husband?"

But Katie turned serious. "My husband will be the pastor of a church, or will serve God in a similar capacity. Of that I am sure."

"You seem very determined."

"I don't think I want to live my life in a less than meaningful way."

"But there are other ways to serve God," John matched her serious tone.

"Most certainly. But most other ways are part-time. Both my parents serve God full time. Anything less would be hard to accept."

Hmmm. Three kids? I can certainly accept that. Be a pastor? Doesn't one have to be called? Pastor Mac thinks I have it in me. I don't think Dad would be too happy. Perhaps I will get my answer at the conference.

"Come on, guys, get to work!" Kyle yelled as he approached. "I leave you alone for a couple of minutes and find you sitting under a tree!"

Terry Maclin was quite aware his Katie was alone with John Tanner, the first time he knew of, and his secret yearning that tall and honorable and upright John Tanner would someday be his son-in-law ballooned into hope. He speculated correctly that they were testing to see if a relationship was plausible. Katie, he knew, was cautious and wise, and would discreetly establish her conditions. She would let John know her heart's desire to someday be a pastor's wife. If Mac's judgment of character was correct, only if John agreed to her terms would he one day make an advance towards his daughter.

John had let him know he accepted his invitation to the conference. Mac would try to arrange for Superintendent Johnston to sit with the both of them during one or two of the meals. There was much at stake.

Mac's job today was supervising and making sure everybody had the tools to do their chores. He carried his smile from place to place, person to person, always pleasant and encouraging and witty. No one could detect buried shallow within was more than a little worry and anger and discouragement.

Mac's worry was regarding his best friend, Trevor Kenny. At the last game played in Tree's hometown, Mac learned Sally would be moving east with their two teenagers. What would his friend do with his life after they were gone? Mac never seemed to get a free afternoon to spend with his bud. *I got to get down there!* he scolded himself.

And there was the worry over his congregation. Tomorrow morning, in keeping with his own standard of openness, he would announce in the church bulletin Tony Borric's resignation, and then worrisome inquiries would bounce back and forth for weeks to come, each one adding to the stress of church life.

Mac's anger was over Tony Borric's resignation from the board of elders. Tony was a good man, serving his fifth term, a sincere kind of a guy, always supportive. No, he wasn't a friend, at least not the socializing kind of friend - Mac never made friends with those whom he shepherded; others would be jealous - but nonetheless he would miss the man. He couldn't fault Tony; he was simply standing on principle. And Mac didn't think he should blame himself. Yes, he could have sided with

Donald Williamson at the start, and the pursuing questions about church structure would remain, happily, unasked. But encouraging the elders to speak freely was the right thing to do though the result was divisive and painful. Reasonable or not, Mac realized his anger was set on the plumber who was now fixing a leaky toilet in the men's washroom.

The burden of responsibility had been returned to Mac's court, as he knew it would. And at this moment he was still undecided. If saying no to Reuben would put an end to it he would say no. To Mac, it was no longer an ethical issue, but a practical one. *How do I get out of this without causing further damage?* was his only concern. But saying no could worsen the situation. Mac was convinced Reuben was not submissive to his leadership; that is why, he reasoned, Reuben was the only person in the congregation who did not call him *Pastor* Mac; that is why Reuben appealed to the governing board to reverse his decision, the only person to have ever done so; that is why Reuben held a weekly gathering of Christians without church endorsement. Would such a man humbly submit to a refusal? Doubtful.

And Mac's discouragement? How could he not be discouraged when he put in a seven day week to build up the *Center* and yet there was no longer growth? There used to be a hundred people for the yearly cleanup; today there was less than seventy. *Don't lose your smile,* he warned himself. *Don't ever admit discouragement or it will spread like a bad flu. Be positive, enthused. Lots of smile.*

The pulpit no longer seemed to work for him. The people failed to be inspired no matter how much passion he mustered. What was wrong? What was missing? Mac thought of requesting help from head office. Superintendent Johnston was an able motivator. And there were others. Perhaps fresh blood would shake off the complacency that had settled upon his people. But how could he admit to needing help? In a few weeks he would be speaking to a roomful of pastors sharing his "success" story, hoping to inspire *them*.

Reuben's mind was not on the toilet he was fixing but under the elm with his son and Katie Maclin. Reuben and John had been close all through John's grow-up years, son adulating father, father attentive to son. The entire Tanner family of seven was closely knit, a fruit, mostly, of Jeni's character and resolve. But now John was drifting, as an eighteen year old will, establishing his own roots, sampling independence. But it was not that kind of tug on his son's heart that was troubling. Reuben knew there was a spiritual struggle over his eldest's loyalty.

He never hesitated to give John permission to attend the conference, nor did he hint disapproval, nor did he give advice. John was heading for nineteen, and Reuben's role was changing. He would be there for his boy but now the boy must come to him. No longer would he impose his perspective.

The hardworking crew enjoyed mealtime in the early afternoon sunshine. There is nothing like a scrumptious meal for the hungry to enkindle happy chatter. A few noticed, and pointed out, the dark clouds climbing over the distant horizon. Perhaps it would recede, they all hoped. It wouldn't.

saturday, april 28th, 2007, 9:30 p.m.

"Announcement: Tony Borric resigns from the board of elders. Yes, after almost ten years of service Tony is calling it quits, but will certainly be serving in other capacities. Tony has always been the selfless servant, and the *Center* is indebted. The board will miss his wisdom and insights. Thanks Tony! God bless ya'!"

Open and upfront? Mac asked himself. *Hardly.* Mac was doing the final touches for tomorrow's bulletin and was stuck trying to formulate the notice of Tony Borric's resignation. *Let's try again.*

"Announcement: Tony Borric resigns from the board of elders. Yes, after almost ten years of service Tony is calling it quits, but will certainly be serving in other capacities. Because Tony felt uncomfortable abiding by denominational policies rather than the teachings of the New Testament, he decided to resign rather than disturb the unanimity of the board. Tony has always been……"

No! That will go over like a lead balloon! The congregation will think the board is willfully disobeying the Bible. And it's not that simple.

"Announcement: Tony Borric resigns from the board of elders. Yes, after almost ten years of service Tony is calling it quits, but will certainly be serving in other capacities. Tony has found it difficult reconciling certain denominational policies with New Testament teachings, and decided to resign rather than disturb……"

Nope. That makes it sound like Tony was alone in his convictions. What about Shaun and David? Mac was in a real dilemma; he just couldn't seem to soften the blow the announcement would make. And then: *Hey, I got it!*

"For your information the revised list of the board of elders is as follows:

Brent Anderson

Nelson Chesney

Shaun Edwards

Terry Maclin

David Tomas

Sheldon Waters

Donald Williamson"

Done! Only a few will notice Tony's name absent. And those few will probably conclude his term was over.

Church politics is a funny thing. The heart, who can understand it?

monday, april 30th, 2007, 9:00 a.m.

It's good to get away from the city, Mac was thinking as he drove to Reuben Tanner's ranch. *Too bad the circumstances were not more pleasant.*

Rather than meet with Reuben in his office - there is something artificial and stuffy about a pastor's office Mac long ago concluded; men should get together in natural backgrounds of life - he had Vivian make an appointment with Reuben at his ranch, supposing he could better discern the man in his own element. You can see into a man through his family, through his mannerism, through his accomplishments and habits. And Mac *did* want to see into the man who was the source of so much havoc.

The roadway into Tanner's property was now compacted in crushed gravel, no longer the bumpy road he remembered. *It's been years since I was here. How many? Six? Ten? Surely it hasn't been fifteen years or more.*

Improvements to the property were everywhere. What appeared to be a large guest house, an A-framed structure, had been constructed about a hundred yards from the log house. Between the two buildings was a spacious playground - swings of various sizes, a trampoline, an elevated playhouse, a net for volleyball, a paved area with a basketball hoop. There was even a batting cage complete with a homemade pitching machine. *No wonder Reuben and John hit so well,* Mac mused.

Reuben had added a two-car garage, a few sheds for his ranch machinery, a barn for hay and feed. Mac counted a dozen horses of various sizes and color, poking their heads out of stalls or munching hay in corrals. *Oh yes, those corrals!* Mac still remembered how his body ached the last time he drove off this place.

The entire acreage of trees had been cleared of undergrowth and dead branches, a chore of hundreds of hours of sweaty labor. The large pavement area in front of the house lined with stone walls and the nearby trimmed bushes and fir trees gave the log house a stately appearance. Mac was thoroughly impressed and not a little envious.

Roo approached Mac at the parking area riding a spotted Appaloosa, leading a saddled gray Palomino.

"Is that for me?" Mac asked in childlike excitement.

"I thought you might like a tour of the ranch. This is our finest horse."

"I would *love* a tour of your ranch." Mac had no problem mounting the beautiful gray though he had done little riding since leaving his dad's farm.

"You okay? Are the cinches right for you?"

"Just right. We are about the same size."

"I always thought of you as being bigger than me, Mac." The compliment was a pleasant surprise,

but Mac kept himself in a guarded mode. “Behind us is about five hundred acres of government land which we lease for a nominal sum. Want to check it out?”

“Lead the way, my friend.”

After an awesome two hours on crown land traveling on well-used trails and traversing two creeks, the pastor and plumber made it to the top of the largest hill where the astounding panorama below stretched many miles to the city and the falls and across the border. Giving the horses a rest, the two men sat on a log Mac knew had been sat on many times before.

“Jeni made us coffee.” Roo reached for a thermos in his saddlebag. “She remembered you like it black.”

“She has a good memory.” The entire congregation knew he drank his coffee black, such attentiveness came with the position of pastor.

“I’m glad you came to our ranch.”

“Sure beats an office. I didn’t see the kids.”

“Jeni has them in class. Today they are holding class in the guest house, working hard for final exams.”

“Roo, I must say, you are truly blessed. This is an ideal place to raise a family. What’s your secret?”

“Jesus.”

Mac didn’t like that one-word answer. *Too blunt or something,* Mac thought. *We all have Jesus Christ but we are not equally blessed.* So he changed the subject.

“The board thoroughly discussed your appeal to reverse my decision to not allow you access to the pulpit. Frankly, they could not come to a unanimous conclusion. They asked me to make the final decision, taking into consideration their input on the matter. As of this moment I am still undecided.”

“I know it is an unusual request.”

“Most unusual, Roo. Most unusual. I confess I was irritated by your appeal to the board, but no longer; you were within your right. I suppose you will be disappointed if I again turn you down.”

“I don’t believe you will.” When a man says so little one has a tendency to read into his few words crafty messages. *Is that a subtle threat?* Mac wondered. *“I don’t believe you will turn me down because you know what will happen if you do?”*

“You sound confident.”

“I am.” Mac could not know Reuben would welcome a way out but was resigned to what he considered to be the inevitable.

Now what is that *supposed to mean?* "I learned something at the board meeting. I had previously said to you that you do not have the endorsement of the board. That's not entirely true. I found out David Tomas sometimes attends your Wednesday night gatherings. He endorses your doctrinal position of the Bible, and the board respects his judgment."

No response.

"I didn't know about your meetings. How many? Half dozen?"

"Usually there are forty to fifty."

"Forty to fifty people?! How many from the *Center?"* Mac's voice was demanding.

"Only David."

"Can we talk about that sometime?" Mac was shaken. How could he not have known? The pastor's office is an information center. Pastors know *everything,* were *supposed* to know everything; they are freely given information people wouldn't tell anyone else.

"Certainly, Mac."

"Now I *must* know the subject of your message."

"Certainly. The message deals with one's relationship with Christ and the impending account we must all give."

"That's it?" *No end-time ranting, no anti-tithing, no anti-church structure?*

"To put it briefly, yes. You may ask me questions if you like."

"No, no more questions. I would be insulted if someone challenged me in that way. However, I would rather you let me communicate your message for you. You could preach the message to me, or give me your notes, and I would relay it to the people. Sounds like a reasonable compromise to me."

"No."

No? No, I am not capable? Have I not given the same message several times? "Okay, okay. I will grant you permission to speak to the congregation. But don't you think you could squeeze it into one Sunday instead of two?"

"I really don't think so. Most are not able to consume too much at a time."

This guy's got no give in him! "Okay, okay. You may preach two successive Sundays. On the third of June I will be at our conference, and it's difficult to find a speaker from our denomination; most will be in attendance, including Phil Ferguson. Will Sunday, June 3rd be suitable for you?"

"I would like you to be there. And Phil. And John."

"Tell you what I will do. I will have a tape of your message made, and I will listen to it as soon as I get back. I will also give one to Phil and John. The following Sunday we will all be sitting in the church listening to the second part of your message in person."

"Could you offer the tape free to the congregation? I will cover the cost."

"I will do that. The church will cover the cost. I have something more to say to you."

"I'm listening, Mac."

"I love the people at the *Center* and am very protective. I do not like the idea of an untrained layman preaching to my congregation; I feel it endangers the unity we worked so hard to attain. However, I feel in this case, because you are so influential, it might be less divisive to allow you pulpit ministry rather than deny you. This will be the last time I open the pulpit to a layman. Please don't ever ask again."

"I heard you, Mac. Can we talk baseball now?"

"My favorite subject. I think we have a good chance for the playoffs, though we are still in sixth place. What do you think?"

"We have some road games coming up, tomorrow night and two next week, and we don't do so well on the road. But we are steadily improving, perhaps the most improved team in the league."

"I think we have to thank John and Kyle for that. They are no longer the timid kids at the start of the season."

Mac was back in his car much more sore than when he arrived, but he enjoyed the excursion immensely. He turned down an invitation to lunch, much Monday work to be done yet.

"Thanks, Roo."

"Come again. Bring Vivian."

"Will do." And then impulsively, "Reuben, I just have to ask: What would you have done if I said no to your request?"

It was obvious Reuben was perplexed by the question. ""What would I do? Nothing. What could I do but accept your decision?"

Damn! Mac said to himself. "Good-bye, Reuben."

"Good-bye, Mac."

Damn! Mac said again. Rarely had he been so angry with himself. He thought of the sleepless hours trying to imagine what mischief Reuben might do if he didn't get his way, and the ensuing problems. *Nothing! That's what he would have done! Nothing! All I had to do was say no and it would be all over!*

Damn!

saturday, june 2nd, 2007, 6:00 p.m.

John Douglas Tanner was seated at one of many round tables in a large church auditorium with Pastor Mac, Pastor Phil, three other ministers from different areas of the U.S., and, sitting next to Pastor Mac, Superintendent Martin Johnston, and beside him his assistant, the aged Frank Grover. In such company it was difficult to enjoy his evening meal. He certainly did not have any input in the conversation, quite content to get through the meal without dropping something on the floor or spilling his drink on the tablecloth.

This weekend was a series of impressions fused upon John, though he realized it only slightly. Were he to consider the matter he would conclude he was merely being observant, not affected. Most are influenced unaware. A man influences his fellow man; a group of the same mind has an accumulated power to draw an outsider to themselves the same way stacked magnets have increased power to capture a nearby nail. Impressions are often, not always, directed towards the heart. The heart first, the mind will follow like a submissive puppy, willing to bend logic to fit the heart's demands.

Traveling with Pastor Mac and Pastor Phil on Friday, first the car trip across the border to the airport and then the flight south to the ministerial conference, was more than a privilege for the young man, it was *impressing.* Being in the company of more than two hundred Reverends, significant all, each obviously important in God's army, was *impressing.* Being a guest at a ministerial conference was more than an honor; it was impressing. Seated across the table from the reverenced superintendent of a powerful denomination was impressing. And his heart *wanted* to be influenced. Wouldn't he rather be a pastor than a plumber? Be in a suit than in overalls? Wouldn't he rather lead than follow? Teach than be taught?

Just attending this conference would boost his status back home. He alone was chosen. He had detected an enhanced value the congregation placed on Kyle when Pastor Mac announced his son's decision to enter the ministry, asking the assembly to uphold him in prayer. How such an announcement would add to the Tanner name. How elevated he would be in the eyes of the assembly. Everyone would be congratulatory. Pastor Mac would be thrilled. And so would Katie.

saturday, june 2nd, 2007, 6:30 p.m.

Katie Maclin stood behind the pulpit, alone in the sanctuary. Her father who was usually here Saturday evenings was a thousand miles away at a conference. With John.

Katie was determined to be in prayer for John the entire weekend. Her future, *their* future, could be determined by this weekend. John belongs here, behind a pulpit much like this one, of that she was certain. And she belonged there, the first row on the left, same place her mom occupied every Sunday morning. She had John's suit picked out for his premiere sermon, a dark gray, matched with

a soft gray shirt and contrasted with a bright blue tie. John was tall, well postured with hefty shoulders and, properly attired, would make a formidable impression. However, he must learn to assert himself, be aggressive, speak with authority and flair. That would come in time - with a little prodding.

saturday, june 2nd, 2007, 6:45 p.m.

Reuben Tanner was a frightened child alone in his office. *I would have given you the biggest hug you ever had!* he should have replied when Mac asked him what he would do if denied the pulpit. But he felt the pulpit was placed in his path and there was no avoiding it. *Two Sundays!* he said to the Lord. *No, one won't do! It's got to be* two *Sundays! And no, You couldn't have picked an experienced preacher; only a plumber would do! Someone who has never stood behind a pulpit before!*

And then, *Oh Lord, I love You so. You went to Calvary for me; I will go to the pulpit for You.*

saturday, june 2nd, 2007, 6:45 p.m.

Jeni Tanner was on the porch in her rocking chair, cross-stitching and praying and rocking and fretting. Fretting was not something she often did, but her eldest was a thousand miles south at a ministerial conference, and she didn't know if that was a good thing or not. Is he called "into the ministry"? And what does that mean? John had accumulated two years of time in his plumbing apprenticeship working summers and Saturdays; in two years he could have his license and steady employment with his dad. He had talked about buying property of his own one day, perhaps close by. If he became a pastor he would live elsewhere, probably far away.

Jeni discerned her son's attraction to Katie Maclin. Was the Maclin girl God's choice for his life? "Do not choose your own spouse," she told her children more than once. "You are not capable. Let God choose for you." Katie was a decent girl with fine parents but too much adulation spoiled her. She was skilled at getting her way; the man she married might spend his lifetime catering to her.

And there was more to fret about. Tomorrow morning her husband was to preach from a pulpit for the first time. It would be easier if he were speaking to strangers. It would be *much* easier if he were invited. When he finally told her about his request to speak, after Mac's visit, there was no elation in his voice, no more than if he announced he had to make a late night emergency call to fix a customer's broken pipe. Making a request to speak and then appealing to the board of elders caused stress for many, no one more than Reuben. When Jeni related how Vivian was sorely distressed by the appeal his shoulders slumped. His motives were undoubtedly being questioned by many, appearing to be ambitious for prominence.

Why should it be so complicated for a man to speak to his friends?

saturday, june 2nd, 2007, 6:45 p.m.

"Pastor Mac speaks highly of you, John." The others around the table quieted themselves when

Superintendent Johnston spoke.

“John has great potential,” Mac joined in.

“All my life I have been encouraged to love God,” John responded.

“Excellent. And do you have an inclination how you might express that love in service?” Johnston queried.

“I was hoping to get an answer this weekend.”

“Perhaps you will. The Lord certainly needs recruits. Our denomination needs dedicated young men to fill the shoes of those retiring.”

“If I become a pastor I would like to start my own church, the same as Pastor Mac.”

“Pastor Mac has been an example to the entire denomination. We value him. I look forward to his message in the morning service.” As Superintendent Johnston said these kind words he gently laid his right hand on Mac’s arm for just an instant. Neither John nor Phil seen any significance to what appeared to be an amiable touch but the others did. A touch from the superintendent who never casually touched carried significant connotations. Mac flushed, perceiving he was being considered for a promotion. Possibly, he dared to hope, he would be invited to replace the retiring assistant superintendent, Frank Grover.

saturday, june 2nd, 2007, 7:00 p.m.

Tomorrow an untrained layman, a man who installs toilets and repairs leaky pipes!, will be standing in my rightful place! Vivian Maclin was not having a good Saturday. She was sweeping the fragments of a broken plate she dropped on the floor into the dustpan. She had been moving unusually fast, too fast, cleaning up supper dishes, driven by anger at her husband’s decision to give Tanner the pulpit, and a slippery plate fell from her hand. For many years she itched to communicate her insights to the assembly she helped develop, to be the voice behind that magnificent pulpit at least one time. Secretly she had fantasized being invited to give the message to the congregation this one Sunday, when both pastors, as well as most pastors from the District, would be at the conference. Certainly she was qualified. Certainly she could hold their attention. And certainly, she reasoned, she was deserving. Though never invited to preach, she managed to suppress her resentment all these years, but no longer. When her husband returned from the convention she would certainly vent her frustration.

Perhaps she should sit in the back row tomorrow morning as a protest. Or maybe sit directly in front of Reuben Tanner in the first row, glaring. No, she would do neither. She would sit in her usual place, first row left-hand side, smiling supportively, the submissive pastor’s wife.

saturday, june 2nd, 2007, 8:30 p.m.

Donald Williamson was on the phone responding to a member's questions for the third time since the pastors left Friday morning.

"No, it was no mistake," the gray-haired responded. "Tony Borric's name was not listed in the bulletin because he is no longer on the board."

"You heard right. His term was not completed. He decided to resign early." *What a time for Pastor Mac to be out of town!*

"Oh, yes, I am sure he's okay. No health problems."

"Well, perhaps you should ask Tony." Donald was feeling more uncomfortable with each question.

"It is not unusual for a group of men to disagree on an issue. Tony decided to resign rather than break the unanimity of the board." *I hope he hasn't heard about the Bible-closing incident!*

"No, he is not angry. He left on friendly terms, assuring us we would always be in his prayers."

"No, I can assure you that's not true. Tony is not protesting Reuben Tanner preaching tomorrow." *How many others are making similar phone calls this evening to other elders?*

After the awkward conversation he rejoined Mrs. Williamson in the living room. "If the phone rings again don't answer it!"

"I can't understand Pastor Mac given permission to Reuben," Mrs. Williamson added to Donald's frustration.

"He felt it would cause less damage to give the man permission than to refuse him. Tanner is influential. Who knows what trouble he would cause if he were rejected. This way, it will all blow over, hopefully little damage done."

"I can't imagine what 'message' he has for us," her cynicism easily detectable.

"We will find out in the morning, my dear. I think Mr. Tanner is going to be poorly received. And he's going to be scared. Do you know he has never stood behind a pulpit before?"

"It can't be that scary."

"Woman, believe me! He will be like a frightened deer staring into headlights! His heart will pound, his body will twitch, his voice will tremble!"

"Then why? Why does the man insist on preaching?"

"Ego trip, perhaps. I think everyone has a hidden ambition to get behind a pulpit. Everyone loves an audience."

"Did you? Is that why you became a pastor?"

"In part, I admit. I miss the high I used to get every Sunday."

"High?"

"You know, an exhilaration. Hundreds of people gathered to hear *me*. It made me feel less insignificant. Powerful."

"And that's why the plumber wants the pulpit?"

"Perhaps. I don't know the man that well. Perhaps he's duped."

"Duped?"

"Duped by the enemy, you know, the devil, who is always trying to make inroads into the *Center* and every church. I'm sure he hates the positive influence for God we have in Bryden Falls."

"But maybe Reuben really *has* a message from God."

"Woman! God doesn't work that way! As I told the board, God is orderly. If He wanted Tanner to speak He would have told Pastor Mac."

"Why don't we stay home tomorrow?"

"Because I'm an elder. All the elders will be there. However, it might be wise if you stayed home."

"I've always walked with my husband; I go where you go," Mrs. Williamson said for the hundredth plus plus time over their fifty-two years of marriage. The Williamsons were dutiful.

"I'm thinking many won't show up for the service. Often when the pastor is away people find an excuse not to go. Sleep in, watch a televangelist, visit other churches."

"I think our church will be packed."

"Oh?"

"Everybody knows something's up. You elders think you can hide it from the congregation but you're sadly mistaken. Curiosity will attract the people, even those who are not regular attenders. Expect a full house, my dear."

"Good grief, woman!"

saturday, june 2nd, 2007, 9:45 p.m.

Phil Ferguson had said goodnight to his wife and children on the phone, had read his usual two chapters of the Bible, and now lay in bed in his hotel room reminiscing the last two days. This was Phil's first convention and he was enjoying it immensely. It was elevating being with the influential. A few months ago he was on the outside looking in, now he was in the inside looking out, no longer a mere layman but a *minister.* This conference was having the effect of making him *feel* like a minister.

Much of the first day was spent reveling in happy reunions; most had not seen each other since the previous convention two years ago. Each had their stories of achievements and disappointments; most were weary from overwork and starving for fellowship with their peers. This would be a weekend of strengthening and refreshing, as they would be on the receiving end of ministry for a change. Their bond to the denomination and to each other would be reinforced, and they would leave here Sunday afternoon with renewed passion.

Superintendent Johnston preached Friday evening from his book, *Building A Church On Wisdom's Foundation,* stressing that vigilance as shepherds and strong control as administrators, coupled with effectual pulpit ministry, will cause any church to grow. The three sermons today by other head office officials were of the same tone, tonic for the discouraged.

Phil was less than humble about his association with the keynote speaker. Mac, a former district elder, was chosen over many officials to give the Sunday morning message. Obviously his perspective was highly respected. If it were not for the younger Tanner, Phil surmised, he would have received more attention from other ministers; it seemed that instead of interest moving from Mac to his new assistant, interest went from Mac to the handsome young lad, probably the youngest in attendance, and he the in-between was mostly ignored. *Oh well,* Phil consoled himself, *life isn't perfect.* He looked forward to tomorrow when two hundred plus suit-and-tie ministers, trimmed to perfection, would gather to hear his superior speak.

Phil was irked by Mac's capitulation to Reuben's request but careful to avoid the subject; fostering a strong relationship with the senior pastor was all-important. He calculated, with scorn, that Mac and Reuben would be preaching almost exactly the same time. One oration would be proficient, he was sure, the other a disaster. He and Mac might have a real mess to clean up when they got back to Bryden Falls.

CHAPTER FIVE

sunday, june 3rd, 2007, 10:35 a.m.

Spirited praise and worship time over, tithes and offerings collected, announcements made, Superintendent Johnston invited Terry Maclin to the pulpit after a glowing introduction. Mac was wearing his favorite suit, a dark gray, matched with a soft gray shirt and contrasted with a bright blue tie. Mac was not surprised at his nervousness though his audience was half what he was used to, having years ago accepted butterflies as a reality of pulpit ministry. He asked the superintendent to pray a blessing on his message, and during that lengthy prayer his thoughts were with the plumber who was at this moment about to give his first sermon under adverse circumstances. *If I'm nervous how scared* he *must be!* Mac empathized. And he carried to the pulpit a concern for his congregation back home. The words of exhortation from the superintendent's sermon on Friday replayed in his mind last night before finally falling asleep. "Never surrender the pulpit to anyone without a strong sense the speaker will be beneficial to the congregation. You will be held accountable for the injury

to your church." *Lord, I'm sorry! Please protect my people!*

sunday, june 3rd, 2007, 10:35 a.m.

Spirited praise and worship time over, tithes and offerings collected, announcements made, Sheldon Waters, worship leader, invited Reuben Tanner to the pulpit after a brief introduction. Mrs. Williamson's prediction was accurate; extra chairs were placed in the aisle to accommodate latecomers. Reuben was dressed in slacks and a light sweater, not departing from his typical Sunday service clothing, undoubtedly to the consternation of more than a few. The plumber was noticeably terrified, his face reddened, his movements rigid, he seemed to be holding his breathe. Without looking up, he asked the only adult in the sanctuary he knew supported and understood him to pray a blessing on the message, his Jeni. Jeni Tanner, seated this one occasion in the front row with four of her five children, was taken by surprise but responded eagerly.

"Lord, Jesus Christ," she prayed in a soft voice, unhearable in the back rows, "I implore you to come to my husband's side. He has proved himself faithful to You, and now he needs Your strength to accomplish what You have called him to do." Her voice strengthened as she prayed. "I pray an anointing of the Holy Spirit upon my husband and the words he speaks." Her voice began to tremble with authority, bringing Reuben back sixteen years ago to that night Jeni bodily picked him off the floor and confronted the evil spirit. "I break the fear over my husband in the name of Jesus Christ!" The assembly was totally attentive, even a little afraid, never having witnessed such shouts of authority. "I release Holy Ghost power upon you," her finger pointing at Reuben, "power to proclaim the truths of God! And I *bind* and *render harmless* all powers of darkness, all oppressive and defeated opponents to the truths of the Most High God!" she spitted the words at the unseen enemy. "Husband, be the man your God called you to be! Preach His word in boldness! In Christ's name!"

Mrs. tanner wasn't finished. Walking to the center aisle, she turned to the people. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear! I unstop stopped ears in the name of Jesus!" She waved her right hand over the people, back and forth, declaring over and over, "I unstop deafened ears in the name of Jesus! In the name of Jesus, hear what the Spirit of the Lord would say to you this morning!" And then she was again the serene Jeni seated in her place.

Reuben's fear was no more. He was free. How he would have liked to find a secluded corner and bask in the sweet presence of the Lord. But he had a job to do.

sunday, june 3rd, 2007, 10:40 a.m.

Mac had given much consideration to his message and seldom had to refer to his notes. It was a hard word; a more prudent man would soften it considerably. He was well aware of the superintendent's presence; his future in the denomination could be affected by this presentation. Nonetheless Mac decided to say it as he seen it, regardless of the consequences.

I have titled my message *Pulpit Power.*

There are few things in the church more powerful than the pulpit, possible exceptions being the writer's pen, prayers of faith, a benevolent smile.

I have been asked to relate to you the story of the founding and growth of *Bryden Falls Community Christian Center;* Superintendent Johnston feels it may be an inspiration and encouragement. In a while I will detail the events of the establishing of the *Center,* but first I want to emphasize that my church has been established, mostly, by pulpit ministry. Through the pulpit I, like everyone here, encourage, oversee, correct and steer. As everyone knows, the pulpit is a powerful instrument through which much good can be achieved.

I remind you this morning, my brothers and colleagues, that the pulpit is an amoral thing, neither moral nor immoral. The fruit of pulpit ministry is dependent on the wisdom and integrity of the preacher *behind* the pulpit. Volumes of both Godly insights *and* false winds of doctrine pour forth every Sunday throughout evangelical churches from both wise and foolish usage of the podium.

I ask you to consider North American evangelicalism of which we are part. How do you rate it? Spiritually healthy? Lukewarm? In need of revival? However you rate evangelicalism, it cannot be denied it is the pulpiteers who made it what it is. Some pastors, in frustration, blame the laymen when their churches lose influence and effectiveness. We have all heard the complaints: "My people are not committed." Or, "They are distracted by the many toys and pleasures of the world." Etc., etc.

But I think that is unrealistic. Shepherds, not sheep, are responsible for the health of the flock. The sheep do not stand behind the pulpit, we do. We are listened to more than any other person in their lives. Leaders are the spokesmen, the teachers. What we say and how we say it is all important. It is hard to overstate the power of the pulpit, and since we control the pulpit we must accept responsibility of the welfare of our assemblies.

sunday, june 3rd, 2007, 10:40 a.m.

The plumber was actually relaxed behind the pulpit, emboldened through the power of his wife's prayer. As he spoke he made eye contact, avoiding no one, not deterred by those who lowered their eyes when his met theirs.

It was after Sheldon Waters was seated that he realized his wife had not accompanied him to their seat. Mrs. Waters was still at the piano, her fingers lightly touching the keys.

May the name of the Lord Jesus Christ be glorified!

I asked for and received permission from Brother Maclin to speak to you two successive Sundays. I come to you as a friend. I believe I have a message from the Lord, the Head of the church, for *most* of the people in our congregation. I emphasize again that I come as the friend I

am, not as a minister, not as a preacher. Almost everyone knows me as Roo the back catcher and Reuben the plumber. I have been in many of your homes to fix your toilets, repair leaky taps, clear drainage pipes. I know you, and you know me; I suppose that is why the Lord chose me to speak into your lives. I say again this message is for *most,* not all. A few do not need to hear this. You will each have to decide for yourself if this word is for you.

Please hear me. You are my friends and I love you. With friendship comes responsibility; "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." Please understand, my friends, I must be forthright. And understand that I seek your well-being, not your approval. Please bear with me.

Reuben paused a long pause. He knew his words were a shock, not only because they were straightforward, but because they came from a plumber, the usher who had always been there to direct them to their seat. Convention, safe and comfy convention, was being assailed. A plumber was where he was not supposed to be. Behind the pulpit. Preaching.

2 Corinthians 5:10: we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

Another long pause.

We must *all* appear before the judgment seat of Christ!

And another long pause.

We must *all* appear before the judgment seat of Christ!

And another long pause. As he spoke his eyes moved back and forth over the rows of people, making eye contact with everyone he could. The many who came out of curiosity only got more than they were prepared for. Their very Christianity was been challenged.

In my opinion you are *not ready* to give an account to Christ.

His gaze was penetrating as his eyes moved from person to person, but not unfriendly. He was the loving brother appealing to, beseeching, beloved brothers and sisters.

You are *not ready* to give an account to Christ.

Were it not for the piano, the silence of the long pauses would have heightened considerably the discomfort level of Reuben's audience. *Funny,* Sheldon was musing, *my wife has never played while someone preached, except occasionally at the end of Mac's sermon, and only at his invitation. And where did she learn that melody? Never heard it before. Nice.*

In my opinion, my friends, most of your works will prove to be wood, hay and straw. They will be consumed by fire.

Some began to squirm. No one had ever spoke to them in such a direct manner. Never. Donald Williamson was astonished at what he was hearing. And angry. *No one ever preaches like that! There*

are more gaps than preaching! You would think the man would at least follow convention! And how dare the man be so judgmental?! Does he think he can see inside everybody's soul?! His glare did not impede the plumber.

Jesus said, "Without Me you can do nothing." Jesus was speaking of the necessity of a healthy relationship with Him.

Jesus said, "He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit." Again, Jesus was speaking of the necessity of a healthy relationship with Him.

You cannot accomplish any good work unless your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ is healthy and intimate.

What the persistent hammer did to the nail, driving it into the aged and hardened timber, so the fifteen-second intervals did to the plumber's words, driving them into the hearts of all but the most impenetrable.

You cannot accomplish any good work unless your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ is healthy and intimate.

In my opinion, my friends, your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ is *not* healthy, is *not* intimate.

Vivian Maclin's face was crimson, offended by the starkness of Tanner's words. And she didn't like him referring to her husband as *Brother* Maclin. And she was agitated by the way Tanner subjected the people to those disconcerting pauses between his sentences. Her agreeable smile vanished after the first few remarks, and after the last she stared straight ahead, a silent statement of protest to the congregation.

Reuben said it again: **In my opinion your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ is *not* healthy, is *not* intimate.**

Jesus taught that we speak from the overflow of our hearts.

Rarely do you speak Christ. Other than in prayer and song you rarely mention His name.

You speak what is in your heart, and you rarely speak Christ.

You speak what is in your heart, and you rarely speak Christ. During our work day in the park, I never heard the name of Jesus mentioned *once.*

Some of you I have known for more than ten years, and during that time you have never mentioned the name of Jesus in conversation.

To know what is in your heart, listen to your own words.

To know what is in your heart, listen to your own words.

And again he said, **To know what is in your heart, listen to your own words.**

Ten, fifteen seconds. Almost every point was repeated, some repeated twice, each separated from the other by an agonizing pause.

If Christ reigns in your heart you will speak Christ.

David Tomas' soft "Amen" broke the silence.

You rarely speak Christ because Christ is not in the forefront of your life.

Christ once reigned in your heart but you have distanced yourself from your First Love.

And again, **You have distanced yourself from your First Love.**

sunday, june 3rd, 2007, 11:00 a.m.

Terry Maclin could not get a sense how his message was being received. There was not the usual "Amens!" and he was sorely tempted to skip the next part of his message, but instead took a deep breath and let it fly.

Because of *Pulpit Power* there is a huge gap between the person you and I are and the person our congregations perceive us to be. This, my brothers, is more dangerous than most realize. We can, and often do, begin to use our congregation as a mirror. We see ourselves through their faulty perspective, and our self-image gets distorted. The tendency is to play the part of that distorted person we imagine ourselves to be. We begin to live a life of pretense. In short, we become pharisaic.

Power still corrupts. Most of us, if not all, have been ill affected to various degrees from *Pulpit Power.* I think of the pulpit as *the god-maker;* given sufficient time it will make a spiritual superstar out of any ordinary person. Every time we appear before the people to impart our perspective we are amplified in their sight. To them we appear to be bigger than we are. We do our best to impress; we wear an expensive suit, keep our hair trim, shoes polished, hone our mannerism. And we *do* impress. We make ourselves appear to be something we are not. Like most orators, we do not bring our true self to the podium; we bring the person the people want and expect us to be, the person we want to believe we are. We denounce hypocrisy, and yet often are the most counterfeit person in the congregation.

Our motives may be honorable. We want them to trust us so they will follow us. We want to protect them from erroneous teachings and deceitful men. Nonetheless, the end does not justify the means. There is no justifying duplicity.

I say again, *Pulpit Power* corrupts. Regularly. It elevates us from the common to the elite. What the stage and lights do to the rock star, so the podium does to the pulpiteer. Our people see us as someone special. We grow in their sight with each dissertation. They want our company much

more than we want theirs. Everyone wants to reach, to touch, to associate with the man in the pulpit, and our love-starved hearts revel in their adulation. We like to think our only motive to excel in pulpit ministry is the welfare of the people. I remind you of Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all things." The one who trusts his heart is the one most likely to fall. Simply said, most of us are incapable of handling the attention and adulation the podium affords.

Our loneliness makes us susceptible. Personally, I don't have a friend in my congregation, not in the buddy-buddy sense of the word, and some of you have shared the same dilemma. There is a wall between the minister and the layman that cannot be breached. You see, the people we minister to cannot be real toward us. Their tendency is to impress us, so they are overly cautious. With good reason. They sense that it would be most detrimental to displease the pastor, because the pastor has an inordinate influence over their lives. They need us to succeed.

Can you see it? First we convince them, through the pulpit, they must attend church regularly. Then we teach them, through the pulpit, teamwork, unity, submissiveness to leadership. Don't you see the leverage that gives us? Can't you see the potential for abuse? We never say so directly, but they understand they need our approval to succeed within the church. For most, opportunity to serve God requires our permission.

There is a breach between them and us. We can't invite one to supper without inviting everyone. My best friend is an alcoholic, an ex-marine bud who lives an hour away, whom I seldom see. If it were not for my family I would be alone. I am with people often, but am lonely. And so are many of you. Loneliness can be dangerous because it is tempting to compensate for our loneliness with people's adulation.

I say to you this morning, if you cannot approach the pulpit in real humility I would suggest you do not approach it at all. The pulpit coupled with pride will destroy you. When the minister is destroyed the assembly is at serious risk. It is difficult to measure your influence, be it for the good or otherwise. A proud man is incapable of affecting positively. There have been instances within our own denomination when entire assemblies have been split and broken by errant pastors who forsook denominational doctrine, replacing them with ear-tickling half-truths.

sunday, june 3rd, 2007, 11:00 a.m.

David Tomas and his wife squeezed each other's hand, signaling to each other their delight in what they were hearing. Donald Williamson and Mrs. Williamson scowled. Tony Borric grinned a wide grin. Brent Anderson and his wife looked like a pair of owls, eyes wide open, staring at the plumber-turned-preacher. Sheldon Waters listened intently, seemingly entranced by Reuben's bold and piercing statements. Shaun Edwards was in tears. Nelson Chesney seemed to be eating his fingernails.

The light within you has not gone out, but has acutely diminished.

You once loved Jesus more, much more, than you do today.

Jesus once sat on the throne of your life, but no longer.

You were once filled with His Holy Spirit.

If you no longer have an enthusiasm for Jesus Christ, if Christ is not the focus of your life, you are not filled with His Spirit.

You have slipped from a rich relationship with Christ to a dull religion.

How could he know these things? Sheldon Waters wondered incredulously. *How can a plumber, an usher, presume to know the hearts of the people? I'm an elder and I can't see into the spiritual condition of the people.*

Your relationship with the Father is no healthier than the relationship you have with His Son.

Your relationship with the Father is no healthier than the relationship you have with His Son.

It is imperative that you turn back to Christ.

Well husband, Vivian Maclin spoke to the husband far away, *you certainly chose a great time to be gone! This man is* bruising *our people, and you're away at a conference!*

It is imperative you turn back to Christ.

It is imperative you turn back to Christ.

You must know that your lukewarmness is contagious.

You must know you affect others negatively.

How can the man be so brutal? Donald Williamson was becoming increasingly agitated with every remark Reuben Tanner made, with every discomforting interval of silence.

You must know lukewarmness cannot be concealed.

You who are parents influence your children to be lukewarm towards Jesus Christ.

Great! Vivian said to herself. *Now he just insulted every parent!*

If you could visit heaven for just five minutes your perspective would be seriously altered.

If you could get just a glimpse of heaven no longer would you busy yourselves laying up treasures on earth.

Five minutes, and you would fervently repent of lukewarmness.

Five minutes there in His full presence and you would stop keeping Jesus at a distance from you here on earth.

"Amen!" David Tomas said, a little louder this time.

Five minutes, and you would fervently bow to the lordship of the Holy Spirit.

If you were taken to heaven for five minutes you would certainly make it your business to develop a healthy and intimate relationship with Christ.

You would return to your First Love.

You would return to your First Love.

You would not allow yourself to be overcome by the cares of this world.

You would make it a point to speak Christ.

You would speak Christ.

Since you will not have the opportunity to visit heaven, you must accept the Scriptures to get God's perspective on eternity.

The Bible makes it clear: the richness of your eternity will be relative to the relationship you develop with Christ here on earth.

A lukewarm relationship with Jesus will cause you to suffer the loss of eternal rewards.

A lukewarm relationship with Jesus will cause you to suffer the loss of eternal rewards.

A lukewarm relationship with Jesus will cause you to be unproductive in the extending and maintaining of God's kingdom here on earth.

It is a serious mistake to approvingly compare yourself to other evangelical Christians.

sunday, june 3rd, 2007, 11:25 a.m.

Mac related to his fellow ministers the details of the founding and growth of his church north of the Canadian-American border. He spoke of the days when he and Vivian first opened their home for a weekly Bible study, knocking on each neighbor's door many times. He shared how they joined several volunteer groups and clubs in the city, always keen to share their faith and invite people to their home. They frequented coffee shops, making casual conversation with those nearby. When they saw a need they tried to fill it as a token of friendship. Always they were in prayer, asking the Lord to guide their steps and lead them to people hungry to know about God.

Mac told his peers about the free Saturday car wash they used to have at a neighborhood gas station, no donations requested, how little by little they became known and accepted in the community, and eventually had several opportunities to speak at length about their Bible and prayer night. Mac and Vivian invested much of their time in the lives of those keen to learn of the Lord, and soon a powerful small nucleus of people evolved. Mac and Vivian were quick to respond to their

needs, whether it be babysitting or cutting a widow's lawn or helping to build a backyard shed, and those people responded to their acts of love by shouldering church responsibilities.

Mac spoke of their move from their house to a vacant school, and from there to the existing building. Everyone listened intently as he spoke of the details of the building project, crediting the ladies prayer group that undergirded every detail of the project. He told how a retired couple from the church searched the internet for bargains and sometimes traveled great distances in a moving van, supplied by another member/businessman, to transport various items to the building site, everything from pews to nails to lumber to carpets to paint..... and a very old, very damaged, yet supremely magnificent pulpit attained at a good price from an eastern state. The stately podium originated in England, thought to have been built during the Reformation years, and eventually found a home in a towering cathedral overlooking an ocean harbor. When the cathedral became a quaint and pricey restaurant, the pulpit became a butcher block, and remained so until finally rescued by the retired couple from *Bryden Falls Community Christian Center*. A plumber-contractor volunteered to restore the podium at his ranch where he and his family spent many hours repairing, sanding, and varnishing. They installed lights at the base giving a dramatic effect to both the pulpit and the preacher, a microphone and attachments to the sound system, and a switch to operate the overhead ceiling lights. Mac, tongue-in-cheek, shared his concern that the people were more attracted to the pulpit than his preaching. He and the plumber set the pulpit in place, connected it to the sound system and overhead lights and thoroughly polished it, the very last task of the building project.

Mac spoke of other outreach ventures into the community, including the *MorLord Worship Band,* explaining the name was chosen by the young people years ago to express their heart's cry for *more* - more grace, more blessings, more of the Lord's presence. He shared that his son was chosen this year's captain of the worship band and his daughter lead vocalist, and about the opportunity the band had to perform at the Bryden Falls annual festival in two weeks time.

And then he spoke of the *Challengers.* Every minister in attendance had at least some baseball in his history and found Mac's account about a Canadian church team competing in an American secular men's league nothing less than fascinating. They laughed heartily when Mac told them how the Americans would be thoroughly disgusted with themselves whenever they lost a game to a *church* team, a *Canadian* church team. He told how they had a chance to make the playoffs for the first time but needed to win the final two games, both to be played next week. And then he delivered his closing remarks.

The real key to building a successful church is to love the people. To love the people you must love each person. Everyone is attracted to love. Love them and they will search you out. Love them and they will return that love.

Everyone craves acceptance. Hurt and lonely people will visit your church in their search for

someone to accept them. They will return if they feel welcomed and not simply tolerated.

Rejection is the ugly foundation of most personality problems. For many you will be the most influential person in their lives; if they sense rejection from you they will be further damaged. People know instinctively when they are loved and when they are not. More than wanting you to be competent, even more than wanting you to be upright, they want to know that you love them.

"Do you love me?" is the real concern of their hearts though they would never ask the question. "Do you love me?" "Will you stand by me?" "Will you invest yourself in my life?" "Do you really care about the outcome of my life?" They will find the answer in the way you relate to them. No one wants to be treated professionally. No one wants to feel they are somebody's ministry.

In a few minutes we will be sharing communion, and in an hour or so the conference will be over and the support and strength we receive from each other will be interrupted for two long years. It is time to return home. Like the captain of a ship, like the manager of a firm, like the coach of a team, we will be with many yet much alone. May you and I remain committed to the Godly principles of the denomination we cherish. May we gladly pay the price, whatever that price might be, to protect the flock entrusted to our care.

May your success in ministry surpass my own. God bless you.

Mac was taken aback by the applause, light as it was. A preacher approved by preachers was a compliment indeed, and Mac was moved. No one else had received more than an occasional "Amen!" that weekend, including the superintendent. Mac knew he touched their hearts.

And yet he felt hollow. When preparing his talk he dismissed sharing the frustration he was experiencing with his church back home. *You know,* he didn't say, *I am really feeling like a failure. Church attendance has not increased for years. It takes all of my energy just to keep the numbers from falling. I try. I try very hard. I preach my heart out, but the people are resistant to my best efforts. They will not be motivated like in years past. Something is missing, and I don't know what it is. The joy is gone. The enthusiasm isn't half what it used to be. The women's prayer group seems to have lost its power. And, my brothers, I am tired, close to burnout. Sometimes I want to walk away from it all. Just walk away. Is there someone who can help me?*

sunday, june 3rd, 2007, 11:25 a.m.

Reuben Tanner spoke with intensity from his heart.

It is a serious mistake to approvingly compare yourselves to other evangelical Christians.

Compromise has become a way of life for most evangelicals.

Compromise has become a way of life for most evangelicals.

Rare is the evangelical who lives by the sole authority of the Bible.

Vivian was steaming. *He's undermining my husband's credibility! My husband, my* foolish *husband, entrusts a* plumber *with his congregation, and the man stabs him in the back!*

Rare is the evangelical who speaks the name of Christ daily or even weekly.

Being a typical evangelical Christian is being a half-hearted Christian.

Donald Williamson was using body language to protest, folding and unfolding his arms, making throaty sounds as if clearing his throat, crossing his legs back and forth, frequently looking at his watch. But if the plumber/usher/preacher noticed it did not deter him the slightest.

The sin of the world is *rejecting* Christ; the sin of the church is *neglecting* Christ.

The standard for all Christians is God's word, not the examples and words of evangelicals.

You cannot depend on evangelicalism to help you.

Lukewarm Christians can only produce lukewarm Christians.

He's inferring my husband is a lukewarm Christian! Vivian concluded.

Evangelicalism was instrumental in bringing you from relationship to religion; it is not able to bring you back from religion to relationship.

Now he's saying my Terry has made this congregation lukewarm! Vivian Maclin could take no more. Slowly and deliberately she stood and walked from her place in the front row down the long red-carpeted aisle to the foyer, not attempting to soften the sound of her high heels echoing throughout the sanctuary, and out the front door she went. Although Kyle was startled at his mother's exit there was no questioning his loyalty, and he immediately followed her. He gave his twin a *Well, aren't you coming?* look, but Katie remained seated.

Your relationship with Christ is a personal matter; you are not to follow the crowd.

"Amen!" David Tomas said loud enough for everyone to hear, seemingly an attempt to neutralize the effect of Vivian Maclin's demonstrative exit. When Donald Williamson turned to glare at his fellow elder across the aisle Mrs. Tomas came to her husband's defense. "Amen!" she said in an equally loud voice.

Jesus said, come follow *Me*.

In the stillness of the intervals everyone could hear the Maclin car driving out of the parking lot.

Christ's message to the unsaved is, "Come follow *Me.*" Christ's message to the saved is, "Come follow *Me.*"

Vivian's exit stoked Donald Williamson's anger into fury, other elders' worry into panic.

It is possible to be saved and yet need to be converted, again, to Jesus Christ.

Now he is telling us, us Christians, *we all have to be converted to Christ!* Donald Williamson resisted the temptation to follow Vivian Maclin's example and walk out of the sanctuary. *I guarantee you, Mr. Plumber, you will not be preaching next Sunday! You will never address this assembly again! Pastor Mac won't allow it!* I *won't allow it!*

Because you were converted yesterday is no indication you are converted today.

"Amen!" This one came from Shaun Edwards. "Amen!" said a few others. Every "Amen!" was significant, a declaration they were taking the side of the plumber against those who opposed him, including the pastor's wife.

If your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ has become dull you need another conversion experience.

During Reuben's entire oration Jeni was in prayer, though eyes wide open and rested upon her husband, prayer that increased in fervency when Vivian made her exit, and more so as the "Amens!" popped up in different corners of the church. She was one of the few who grasped the import of the moment - her beloved assembly was being split in two.

You must again make a decision for Christ.

And again, **You must again make a decision for Christ.**

You would be wise to recommit your life to Jesus Christ.

Tears streaked the faces of many.

You can have a better life than the one you now have.

You can have a better life than the one you now have.

With Christ comes joy. You want joy.

With Christ comes peace. You want peace. You want Christ. Whether you realize it or not, you want Christ.

With Christ comes gold and silver and precious stones to one day lay at His feet.

If you make a decision to walk with Christ the Holy Spirit will come to your aid.

If you return to Christ you will be part of the answer instead of part of the problem.

If you recommit yourself to Christ you will affect others positively.

If you live for Jesus you will not be ashamed at the judgment seat of Christ.

If you turn to Jesus and spend the rest of your days on earth walking with Him you will one day hear those words, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

sunday, june 3rd, 2007, 12:05 p.m.

It was a poignant communion service, climaxing a weekend of bonding and mutual encouragement. The Lord responded to the men's hearty songs of praise and worship by blanketing them with His Presence. Men knelt together, ministered to each other, cried tears, embraced, exchanged heartfelt good-byes.

Phil Ferguson was deeply touched, not only by the communion service but the entire weekend. He felt included. Accepted. He took Mac's message to heart. He would love the people at the *Center* as never before. He would love them individually, yes, even that plumber.

Mac, himself a past district elder who had served the two-term limit, was sure he was being seriously considered for advancement, perhaps as assistant superintendent, a station likely to eventually lead to top position. He knew how it would happen. A registered letter will come, probably in a few days, from the superintendent's office asking if he would allow his name to stand for consideration for a particular position. The rest would be a mere formality; district elders would vote their approval and make it official.

John Tanner was both highly impressed and influenced by the conference, especially Pastor Mac's sober yet stirring message and the subsequent communion service. He was disappointed, however, because the voice from heaven he hoped to hear, an unmistakable *call* from God into the ministry, of which he heard others testify, never happened. Perhaps, he thought, God doesn't always beckon in such direct ways. He felt the presence of God at the communion service in a significant way; perhaps this was a sign that God was calling him into the ministry. *Yes, that's it! I will accept that as a sign! Yes, I will accept it by* faith! *God has called me into the ministry! Alleluia!*

"Time to go home, John," Mac said to the eighteen year old after finding him in the crowd.

"Yes, Pastor Mac. It's time to go home."

"I feel revived," Phil added, "but now I am ready for some restful routine."

"Routine is a good word," Mac agreed.

sunday, june 3rd, 2007, 12:05 p.m

Reuben Tanner had a few concluding remarks.

My brothers and sisters, thank you for hearing me. My task is half finished. Next Sunday morning I will give the last half of my message. Today I have shared, for your consideration, what I see as a most serious problem in most of your lives; next week I will try to show you how to regain the standing you once had with Christ. Sheldon?

Sheldon Waters took Reuben's place at the podium, Mrs. Waters still seated at the piano. After announcing that a free tape of Reuben's message would be available at the end of the service, he

and his wife led the congregation in worship songs focusing on Christ.

Even though the presence of the Lord fell heavy upon the assembly, Sheldon's mind wondered from the task at hand. From his vantage behind the pulpit he could take in the most unusual scenario. He could see Donald Williamson and David Tomas through the open double-door leading to the foyer having what seemed to be a heated argument while trying, but failing miserably, to maintain their composure in front of others. Many young people, always grouped together near the back, seemed to be absorbed in the Lord's presence. He noticed Katie Maclin and Todd Anderson in serious conversation, Katie gripping Todd's arm as she spoke emphatically to him. Jeni Tanner moved from one sister weeping in prayer - perhaps in repentance, Sheldon thought - to another and another. Shaun Edwards was holding his wife's hand with both of his, occasionally wiping pesky tears with a handkerchief. The plumber was on his knees bent over a chair, head in his arms, alone in his own world. *Does he know what he has done? Did he plan it?,* Sheldon wondered. People were in pairs discussing, Sheldon was sure, the plumber's message, and he could easily discern that much of the discussion was adverse. Nelson Chesney and Brent Anderson were conversing with each other, perplexed impressions on their faces.

Sheldon closed in prayer, but when many did not move from their seats the Waters continued to minister. The worship of the Lord by those remaining was fervent and sincere, and the Presence became even heavier. It was a time when Sheldon should have been focused, but he knew he was witnessing an historic event. The congregation would never be the same again, irreparably split in two. And what should he as an elder be doing, thinking, feeling? Should he be mad, sad, or glad? Should he quit leading in song, tell the people to go home? What would Pastor Mac do?

He could see that several were at the resource table in the foyer picking up the free tape. Should he get one up for himself? Or would that be disloyal? If so, to whom? Did he really want to hear the message again? Could a word that split the church possibly be from the Lord? Had *the enemy* made inroads into the assembly under his watch?

He thought of saying something to the assembly to soften the blow of Reuben's exhortation. But what should he say? What *could* he say? Were the people, that is, most of the people, doing as poorly as Tanner seemed to think? What makes a plumber an authority on the spiritual welfare of a church?

Sheldon had never witnessed someone pray as Jeni Tanner prayed for her husband before he spoke. He could not deny the Reuben after her prayer was not the Reuben before her prayer; before his eyes the timorous plumber became the emboldened preacher. Never had Sheldon experienced a message delivered in such a way, with long pauses between each statement. Gentle he wasn't. But one could not say he was harsh either. One thing for sure, Reuben Tanner would be the center of major controversy from now on.

How did it come to this? Sheldon remembered the fax marked *Private Matter* regarding Reuben's

unusual request, which led to an animated discussion at the elders' meeting, which led to Tony Borric's resignation. The image of the closed Bible in the middle of the board table would not go away. It was hard to conclude anything other than Reuben Tanner meant trouble, and much of it.

CHAPTER SIX

monday, june 4th, 2007, 11:00 a.m.

11:00 a.m. was an unusually late hour for Mac to arrive at his office on a Monday morning, but 2:30 a.m. was an unusually late time to get to bed. The flight connection from the conference was not so good, and then there was the one and a half hour drive from the airport to Bryden Falls, drop off John at the Tanner ranch, Phil at his house at the opposite end of the city, and finally the drive home. When he awoke at 8:30 the house was empty, the twins at school, Vivian already out the door. Mac rolled back the folding door separating the office and boardroom and pushed the board table against the wall to give himself pacing space. He had serious Monday morning pondering to do, a fine sunny morning it was, and an active week to organize in his mind.

It had been a good weekend. Very good, actually, considering the supportive applause from his colleagues, not so much for his delivery, he humbly concluded, but rather the content. And then there was the superintendent's touch on his arm. In this denomination subtleties were custom, an art to be learned both in conveyance and interpretation. Confirmation came during the communion service. A senior district elder suggested that many people could be blessed by Mac's insights, for most a casual compliment but Mac recognized the heavy inference. He would not be tardy checking his mail.

Yes, a good weekend. He was sure some maturity rubbed off from other ministers onto Phil Ferguson. It was time to give his assistant pulpit responsibility. There was good in that young man, Mac was sure, good that would come to bear fruit in his congregation. And then there was John Tanner. Mac sensed John had made a positive decision regarding the ministry. Though John was private with his thoughts, Mac could tell the boy was free from the struggle of indecision he brought to the conference. Mac felt he had good ground for optimism.

Mac could hear the phone ringing at Vivian's desk outside his office a few times and the recorder picking up messages, though unintelligible from behind the closed door. *Where is Vivian?* he wondered. *Shopping? An appointment?*

Since Vivian was not here with her usual itinerary Mac searched his memory for details of the upcoming week. Not much happening today, Mac concluded. Mondays were usually slow, the people having learned to respect Mondays as a rest day after a busy Sunday. Tuesday? Big game. *Big* game. They have to beat the *Grizzlies.* They need two wins out of their final two games of the season, both played at home this week, in order to make the playoffs for the first time. The *Grizzlies* beat the *Challengers* three games out of four this season, the fourth being a tie at the *Grizzlies* home

diamond. But Mac was confident. The *Challengers* were coming on strong the last half of the season, thanks mostly to the youngsters, Kyle and John. Also, two of the losses against Tree's team were real close. Kyle would be pitching Tuesday; Mac had to admit his son was now as good as his dad, and his arm was well rested. Should be a good game.

Friday evening they would face the *Pirates* for the final game of the regular season. They beat them twice, the last two times on their own diamond, and Mac knew they could do it again here at home. He would be pitching that game and would give it his best.

There's the phone again. Unusual for a Monday.

Saturday. Another big day. The *MorLord Worship Band* was playing in the park, their big performance of the year. There would be four bands entertaining during the weekend of the city's annual celebration, and they were the only Christian group invited, undoubtedly a kickback for all the volunteer work donated to the community, and they were given the most enviable time slot, Saturday evening. This was huge for his twins. Kyle carried his guitar throughout the house, even while preparing the salvation message he, as team captain, would be given during the performance. And Katie was working her voice, filling the Maclin house with *lalalala's.* It was Katie's biggest night of the year, the nervous preening would start in the afternoon and go on for hours.

And then there was Sunday. Reuben would preach one more time, the last time ever at his pulpit. Mac decided he would never again give a layman access to the pulpit, not for any reason. If someone accused him of favoritism because he allowed Reuben to preach he would admit he made a mistake. Period. He realized his poor judgment at the conference, in part from his own message. If Reuben did a shoddy job it would all be pointless; if he did a great job his influence could grow enormously, such is the power of the pulpit, and that would not be good; unlike everyone at the conference he was answerable to no one. Nonetheless he gave his word and he would not renege. Reuben would give the second part of his message on Sunday.

Oh yes, he remembered, *I promised Roo I would listen to his message when I returned.* He hadn't paid any attention to the portable tape recorder placed, obviously by Vivian, on the center of his desk. And yes, there was a tape inside marked "Reuben Tanner, Sunday, June 3rd." *Funny, I don't remember telling Vivian I wanted to listen to Roo's tape.* Just as he was about to push the play button, the phone rang …… again! *Where's Vivian?* he asked himself the second time as he walked out the office to the recorder on her desk. No one was around to disturb his privacy so he pushed the message button. "You have twenty-six messages," the recorder spoke. *Twenty-six messages! Can't be!*

"Message number one," the mechanical voice droned. "Pastor Mac. Donald Williamson. I guess Vivian told you about the service yesterday. Please get back to me right away!"

What? Mac was suddenly attentive.

"Message number two." "Pastor Mac, Ruth O'Brian calling. My husband and I were wondering if we

could come and talk to you about the things Reuben Tanner was talking about yesterday. Frankly we are somewhat confused and hoped you could clarify some things for us. Hope you enjoyed the conference. Oh yes, our phone number is 292-7104, just so you don't have to look it up."

"Message number three." "Pastor Mac, I don't want to complain but I was very upset yesterday. I thought we were doing so well, as a congregation, I mean, and now I'm told we are doing terrible."

Oh my God!

"Message number four." "It's me again, Pastor. I forgot to leave my name although I suppose you recognize my voice. It's Patty Freeman. And, oh, Herbert says to tell you he's not happy either. Have a good day. Say hi to Vivian for me."

Lord, what have I done?!

"Message number five." "I would like a return call as soon as possible please. Glen Matthews, 292-8784."

"Message number six." "Pastor Mac, just inquiring to see if the plumber will be speaking next Sunday like he says he will. If so, my wife and I will be attending another church that day. Gerry Tronson, 292-0074."

"Message number seven." Mac backed away from the recorder so that he could hear, but just barely. "Pastor Mac. Sheldon Waters. Hope you had a good weekend. I guess you know by now we've got serious problems. I think we are facing a church split. I suppose we better call an emergency board meeting. I want you to know I am with you."

No! No! No! A church split?! I'm gone one *weekend and my church is rendered in two!*

"Message number eight." "Hi, Pastor Mac. I would sure like to talk to you face to face and have you level with me. Am I really unprepared to give an account to Christ? I attend this church because I thought we were doing so well. Gord Longley, 292-8991, or my cell 876-4243."

I can't take anymore of this! He would have turned the recorder off but couldn't make himself move.

"Message number nine." "Just wanted to say I don't blame Vivian one little bit for walking out of church during Reuben's message. I felt like doing the same thing. Also, I didn't like the way Jeni Tanner was carrying on before the congregation, prancing around like that! In my younger days the pastor would never have allowed such a thing. Have a good day, Pastor. Sister Goodwin."

My God, my God, my God! Mac made his way to the washroom to soak his face in water to bring life back into his traumatized body. *Vivian left the church in the middle of the sermon? Why?* Vivian had never done anything like that, always the one to keep her composure no matter how difficult the circumstance.He stood at the sink for several minutes staring at his face in the mirror. *This is madness..... I can't believe my stupidity..... how could I have let this happen?..... maybe it's not too late to*

patch this up..... damage control..... that's it..... I must think damage control..... but first I got to get myself *under control..... come on, marine!..... pull yourself together!*

"Message number twenty-three," he heard the recorder say on his way back to his office. "Pastor Mac, this is Nelson. I guess you know by now what has happened. Brent and I were talking, and frankly we think it was a mistake giving the podium to a layman. I know we all agreed we would back you on whatever decision you made but we both feel strongly you should reverse your decision. We will be praying for you ....." Click! Mac hit the off button. *No more! Not one more word from anybody! Got to think! What should I do?*

monday, june 4th, 2007, 11:15 a.m.

"Mom, that looks like the Maclin's car." John had been at his studies on the front porch when he noticed the car speedily approaching their house, the same one he was riding in the first hours of this morning. "I think it's Mrs. Maclin," he said to his mother when she came out to the porch. "I hope everything's okay."

"Everything is *not* okay, son."

"Something I should know about? Katie and Kyle, are they okay?"

"Yes, John. It's nothing like that. I never had a chance to talk to you yet. Your father and I were going to talk to you tonight."

"Sounds serious."

"Yes, very serious." Jeni walked to Vivian's car to greet her.

The breeze carried most of their conversation away from John but he did pick up occasional pieces. John had never seen Mrs. Maclin lose her composure before. His mom, however, was her cool self. He thought of going inside, the polite thing to do, but perhaps it was a problem he could help rectify. When he heard "Reuben" and "your husband" he immediately made the connection: his dad's preaching didn't go over so well yesterday. *What could Dad have said that would rile Mrs. Maclin so completely?* When he heard the words "church split" a few times he connected that to his mom's "Yes, very serious."

Mrs. Maclin drove off just as fast as she came. His mom's eyes were filled with tears, her face with worry.

"Can we talk, Mom, or would you rather wait for Dad?"

"It wouldn't be fair to make you wait. Your father made some statements while delivering his message that upset a number of people. Mrs. Maclin felt he undermined Pastor Mac's credibility."

"Doesn't sound like Dad."

"You can judge for yourself." Jeni pulled out a tape of Reuben's message from her apron pocket.

"But obviously Pastor Mac asked him to speak. He must trust Dad."

"No, it's not like that. Your father asked Pastor Mac for permission to speak to the congregation."

"But why?"

"He felt he had a message from the Lord for the people."

"And Pastor Mac gave his okay, right?"

"He refused your father. Your father appealed to the board of elders. They could not agree, one of the elders resigned, and they asked Pastor Mac to make the final decision. Pastor Mac finally agreed to allow your father to speak."

"Did you know what Dad was going to say to the church?"

"I had no idea."

"Was it all that bad? Mrs. Maclin seemed quite upset."

"I think our unity is gone. I don't think our church will ever be the same."

"But Mom, what did Dad *say?"*

"Listen to the tape, son."

"I'm not so sure I want to."

"I understand."

"What did Mrs. Maclin want? Why did she come?"

"She didn't say directly but I think she was hinting our family should find another church."

"No!"

"I know that's upsetting to you. Please don't say anything to the other children. We could be in for a major crisis or perhaps this will all blow away. I am sure your father will do what is best for the people at the *Center."*

"But it seems like such a betrayal."

"I am sure Vivian is not speaking on behalf of the pastor or the board."

"I thought Mrs. Maclin was your friend, Mom. How could she turn on you just like that?" John snapped his fingers loudly.

"When you were a toddler Vivian offered me her friendship which I gladly accepted. However, her idea of friendship is not what I understood the term to mean. I think she meant a pastoral relationship

whereby she would be a spiritual influence. We never did relate socially."

"Does she have *any* friends?"

"I'm sure she does, back in her home town, and lots of family."

"It still seems like a betrayal."

"I can't answer that, John. I do know our entire family is deeply indebted to both of the Maclins. If it wasn't for Vivian you and I could be standing downtown at this very moment with an *Awake!* magazine in our hand."

"I know the story, Mom. And I love Pastor Mac. But our family has deep roots at the *Center.* It would be so painful to have to leave."

"Yes, painful for everybody. Back to your studies now, John Douglas. You don't want to upset your teacher. I'll bring you a cool glass of water."

"With lemon?"

"With lemon."

Suddenly John's world became complicated. On the way home from the conference he had decided to phone Katie for the first time ever, reckoning she would be sitting near the phone about 7:00 in the evening waiting for his call. He wanted her to be the first to hear the exciting news of his decision to enter the ministry. Now he realized the timing would be terrible. In a few days perhaps.

monday, june 4th, 2007, 1:00 p.m.

Pacing back and forth in his office helped diffuse the anxiety the answering machine sucker-punched him with an hour ago. Still, he had not yet pushed the play button on the cassette tape recorder that held the secrets to the turmoil that had suddenly swept his church. Nor was it yet time to answer the phone. Nor did he listen to the remaining messages. It was time to stabilize and strategize.

First, he coached himself, *confront denial: my church is in a crisis, no, not just a challenge but a serious crisis. Second, it is not time for blame, not myself, not Reuben, not anyone; that would come later. Three, keep emotions in check: no anger, no fear, no tears. Four, don't shy away from anyone. Confront. Maintain eye contact. Five, demonstrate confidence; like insecurity, it is contagious. And six, pray. Why do I always forget to pray? God will help me as I lean on Him.*

Mac was about to leave for the empty sanctuary, his favorite praying place, when Vivian walked into his office. Her greeting was not, "Hi, Hon, have a good sleep?" or, "How was your weekend?" Or, "Glad you're home." But rather:

"Terry, that man is *not* preaching - if that's what one wants to call what he did - next Sunday!"

"I was wondering where you were at." His hope was to diffuse and distract. It didn't work.

"That man is *not* going behind our pulpit again!" *Four, don't shy away from anyone. Confront. Maintain eye contact.* Ouch! That didn't work either; her eyes were blazing and quite able to stare him down. He considered escaping out the open window behind him.

"What took us, and I emphasize *us*, years to build, this *plumber* destroyed in less than an hour! What do you intend to do about it?"

Five, demonstrate confidence; like insecurity it is contagious. "Actually, I have no idea."

"May I suggest you come up with something quickly? Many people are going to expect you to fix this mess."

Second, it is not time for blame, not myself, not Reuben, not anyone. "I was a fool to allow a layman behind the pulpit. Why did Reuben have to appeal to the board? He must have known the discord it could cause. And the board should have been able to come to a conclusion. But no, they threw the whole thing on my shoulders!"

"Our congregation is split! Not all of the phone calls were complaints. Some actually want that man to preach *more often!"*

First, confront denial; my church is in a crisis, no, not just a challenge, but a serious crisis. "Well, maybe it's not so bad. Perhaps it will blow over. You know, people have short memories."

"I think Pastor Mac is dreaming. The man cut you down in front of your own congregation." In a contemptuous tone she quoted Reuben, "In my opinion, my friends, most of your works are wood, hay and straw. They will be consumed by fire." And then, "Who do you think the people are going to blame for their 'wood, hay and straw'? Their confidence in you is damaged, perhaps permanently."

Three, keep emotions in check: no anger, no fear, no tears. "You're right. Our church could fall apart over this. Now please! You made your point quite well!" *Shut up, big mouth. Let her get it all out.*

It took ten minutes of verbalizing her anger and frustration before the pressure was sufficiently relieved. And then she became the composed pastor's wife once more.

"May I ask where you were?" Mac asked again.

"The Tanner ranch."

"Oh?" There was concern in that "Oh?"

"I talked to Jeni." Vivian was quickly becoming subdued.

"Oh?"

"I hinted the Tanner family find another church," she said defiantly.

"That was a mistake." Before his wife could respond Mac was out the office heading for the sanctuary.

monday, june 4th, 2007, 2:15 p.m.

"Good morning, Vivian! How are you?" Though it was Phil Ferguson's day off and though he was still tired from the weekend, the *Center* was in trouble and he couldn't stay away.

"Livid. And yourself?"

"Well, I was flying high because of the conference - Mac was really good - and then I got some phone calls. I understand you had *quite* a service yesterday." Phil itched to say, *I knew Mac was making a mistake; I was against that plumber preaching from the start,* but he would be a loyal friend.

"Yes, a *most* unusual service." Vivian's fury was beginning to rise again.

"Have you been getting many calls?"

"Dozens."

"Wow!" And then, "Where's Mac?" Phil still got a buzz from being the only one at the *Center* who did not have to say, *"Pastor* Mac," church functions excepted.

"He's in the sanctuary. I think he's praying."

"Should I disturb him?"

"I already did." Phil couldn't know what she meant. "I think he needs to be alone," Vivian added, and just then the phone rang - again.

"You're not going to answer it?"

"I don't know what to say."

"That's why I'm here. I tried to phone but I got the recording."

"I'm not going to apologize."

Phil wasn't offended. "Anything I can do?"

"Would you like to answer the phone?"

"No."

"Did you listen to Reuben Tanner's tape?"

"I don't have one." Vivian reached into a drawer and handed him a cassette tape.

"First thing, be informed and make a judgment."

"I'll listen to it in my car. Tell Mac I'm here when he needs me. I've got my cell."

"I'm sure he'll be in touch soon."

monday, june 4th, 2007, 2:20 p.m.

Both of Mac's hands were outstretched gripping the pulpit, body leaning forward, head hanging low. *Damned fool!* he said to himself for the umpteenth time. *I'm the big wheel telling the guys at the conference how to successfully build a church and at the same time - at the very same moment! - my church is being dissected by a plumber!* "A plumber!" he said out loud, raising his hands in exasperation. *What business has a plumber behind this pulpit?*

In the quiet of the sanctuary prayer refused to come, and shame and guilt and confusion and frustration draped him like a robe. *Why didn't I just say no? We wouldn't be in this mess if I just said no! No is not a hard word to say! Just no, no, no!*

Mac knew Vivian's hinting the Tanners should leave the *Center* was like trying to douse a fire with gasoline. Some would see the injustice and follow them out the door; everyone would have to go through the crucible of deciding where to place one's loyalty. *Besides,* Mac concluded, *it just wasn't right to ask them to leave; expediency must never overrule justice. We are supposed to be Christians!*

Mac's thoughts rolled on. *The Tanners are a good family; who could deny it? The best. It was families like this that built the* Center. *Roo may have been duped to think God wanted him to speak to my congregation but being deceived is not a crime. He loves this congregation and would not harm it. Pitchers know their back catchers and I know Reuben Tanner. He would never wrong me intentionally.....would he?*

Mac tried to put himself in Reuben's shoes to ascertain the loyalty of the man, to determine if there could be reason for jealousy or resentment. A back catcher certainly has less prominence than a pitcher, and although the catcher has input into the strategy to best the batter, he is subservient to the dictates of the pitcher. *How would that affect me, to have to bow to the whim of the pitcher, season after season after season? Don't think I would like it much.* And then Mac tried to consider what it would be like to have to submit to a coach who was no more qualified. *Would I carry a grudge, even without realizing it?* Also, Reuben could have, even *be expected* to have, resentment that one less qualified was chosen as *assistant* coach; but Phil was assistant pastor so therefore should be assistant coach, Mac reasoned, though not fully convinced of the soundness of his own logic. *And what's it like to always have to be compliant to the pastor, to always be the student and never the teacher, the servant and never the guy in charge? Didn't I resent my superiors in the marines? Do I not sometimes balk when I have to submit to head office directives? Why should Roo not resent me? Why should I take for granted his loyalty?* And then Mac had another thought.

Everybody's promotion in the church depended on him. Teachers were teachers, elders were elders, musicians were musicians only because Mac allowed them to be such. Reuben Tanner was an usher, always an usher, not even head usher. Never had he been offered a placement of higher responsibility, and Reuben most certainly knew that was Mac's doing. *How would I like that? I think I*

could become a bitter person over the years. Yes, Mac had his reasons: Roo didn't tithe, Roo was not a team player, Roo was accountable to no one. But such logic would be of little consolation to Reuben. How could he not feel the sting of rejection?

Hmmm.....rejection.....resentment.....jealousy.....maybe that's the underlying motive behind Roo's request for my pulpit. A chance to prove he is equally spiritual and able as I am, a chance to inflate his deflated self-worth.

And then a horrid thought: *suppose Superintendent Johnston finds out about my stupidity? I can kiss a promotion good-bye! Maybe I should just phone him. Yes, that's it! I'll admit my blunder and ask for his help. He would be the compassionate father rescuing an errant, but repentant, son. I'll hold a weekend seminar with Johnston as key speaker. As superintendent, his presence will help disperse dissension, pull the church together again. Praise the Lord, I think that's the way out of this mess!*

And so Mac decided his course of action. He would wait one week, one week from today, and then contact the superintendent. By then Reuben's preaching career would have come to an end and the patching up would begin in earnest.

Still, Mac felt weak. More than anyone he felt the trauma of the moment - even his body was traumatized. What he needed the most he didn't have - a friend. *Not true,* Mac suddenly realized, *I* do *have a friend!*

Vivian was still at her desk when Mac finally came out of hiding. "Vivian, are we ..... together?"

"You're my husband."

"Good. Please ask Phil to arrange an emergency board meeting for tomorrow evening."

"You have a game."

"I will have to miss it. But tell Phil he can't. We both can't be away. Also, make a list of all the return calls I have to make."

"Done."

"Good. How many?"

"Thirty-seven."

"Ouch! I will make them in the morning. Mondays are still my off day. Right now I need to get out of here. I suggest you lock up and go home to the twins. They might need you," Mac said while heading for the door.

"Where are you going? Will you be okay?" Vivian had to raise her voice.

"I will be okay. I'm going to a ball game," he yelled back.

"Will you be late?"

"Yes."

"How late?"

"Late late."

monday, june 4th, 2007, 4:15 p.m.

Vivian was home before the twins returned from school after facing the challenge of final exams. Katie came into the living room where her mom was sitting on the couch knitting another sweater for Dad.

"Hi, Mom. Can we talk?" Apprehension.

"Certainly, Katie." Warm, but not as warm as usual.

"I think I hurt you when I didn't walk out of the church with you."

"Deeply. If the situation were reversed I would have been at your side."

"I know. You and Dad have taught us a family sticks together."

"Especially a pastor's family. We need each other."

"Mr. Tanner's words moved me."

"They moved me, too!"

"I don't mean that way, Mom."

"I can't understand that. He ruthlessly undermined your father."

"Intentionally?"

"There are always those who want to tear down what others have built. Jealousy, maybe, or male rivalry. Your father holds a place of prominence and that position can cause resentment."

"Mom, I was deeply convicted by Mr. Tanner's words. He made me see myself as I am."

Vivian's frustration was surfacing again. "You are a beautiful young lady, good and decent. You are developing into a mature adult, capable of serving the Lord in an effectual manner. Don't let anyone put condemnation on you."

"I was rededicating my life to Jesus Christ when you walked out of the church. I was not putting Mr. Tanner before you. I was making Christ first. I want to live for Him as never before."

"You have always loved Christ. Your life of service proves that."

"I have given up lead vocalist. I convinced Todd Anderson to do lead. I am now one of the support

vocalists."

"No! You have wanted lead for a year now!"

"Longer than that."

"Your father will be disappointed. He is looking forward to Saturday, seeing his little girl ministering to hundreds of people. He doesn't need another setback. You may not realize it but our church is on the verge of a major schism."

"You mean a church split? Because of Mr. Tanner?"

"Because of Mr. Tanner. He convinced some, perhaps many, that all their good works at the *Center* has not been pleasing to God. And who do you think they are blaming? Your father! He does not deserve this …… betrayal!"

"I know Dad works very hard, Mom."

"No, you don't know." Tears were streaking Vivian's make-up. "I'm the only one who knows the price your father pays. He lays awake worrying about Debra Henderson's teenage daughter who got mixed up in a bad crowd. And Brother Melloche who has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. And the Simmons who are going through a divorce after thirty years of marriage. There is always someone in crisis. Always! And your father is there for them, making their burden bearable. Your father has a pastor's heart. He loves his people. Not only would he lay down his life for them, he *has* laid down his life. He is tired. He is aging. And now we are told - by a plumber!, an usher! - his ministry has been defective."

Rarely has Katie seen her altogether mother in tears. "Hold me, Mom," she said as she sat beside her. Mother and daughter were serene now, both in tears, both afraid.

monday, june 4th, 2007, 7:30 p.m.

"Top of the ninth and final inning," the cheap sound system blared. "The *Grizzlies* are down one run. Tree Kenny on the mound. Red Morgan first at bat."

Tree wanted this game. The *Grizzlies* needed one more win to clinch top place in the division for the fourth year in a row. He was heartened by the fact that if they lost this one they could pick up an easy win against the *Challengers* tomorrow night, for the *Grizzlies* the final regular game of the season. His back to the batter, slouched casually, glove under his arm, rubbing the ball between his two hands - a ritual meant to psyche out the opposition. In fact, however, of the two, pitcher and batter, it was Tree who had reason to be worried. Red, nicknamed after the color of his hair, was their team's best hitter, a batting average of .392. Facing the batter, Tree noticed a familiar figure standing on the second row of benches directly in line with him, the catcher and the ump. *Mac!* Although genuinely excited, he did nothing more than flick his glove to acknowledge Mac's presence; marines keep their cool. And then he noticed Mac giving a signal, a clenched fist at his belly. *Now what is* that

supposed to mean? Hmmm. Clenched fist? That would mean hard or fast. Belly? Down the middle of the plate. Okay, Dude! Hope you know what you're doing. So Tree threw a fastball down the middle of the strike zone.

Just as Mac calculated, Red didn't swing. "Strike one!" Mac didn't have Tree's arm but he was pretty good at reading a batter. He had faced Red many times and felt Red was trying to get a walk. Being a threat to any pitcher Red had an advantage; pitchers tended to throw lots of balls rather than strikes in the hopes he would reach for a bad pitch. This meant the batter had a good chance to get a walk to first base, if he was patient, instead of risking a fly to a fielder or grounding out to a baseman. Although Red pretended to be angry after the first strike, ready to swing at anything, Mac discerned he had no intention to swing his bat, sure that Tree would not pitch two strikes in a row. Mac gave the same signal, which surprised Tree. *You've got to be kidding! Two strikes in a row? Okay, pal.*

Again, Red didn't swing. "Strike two! No balls, two strikes." Now Red *knew* Tree would not throw *three* strikes in succession. He never has. He would let this one go by and maybe swing at the next one. But Red was wrong. Mac gave the same fist-to-the-belly signal. *Oh, come on!* Tree didn't like this at all. *Not three in a row!* But Tree obeyed the signal and Red didn't swing. "Strike three!" Never before had Red been struck out with three pitches without swinging his bat. *That was easy. One out, two to go,* Tree said to himself.

Tree turned his back to the second batter, wondering what Mac was going to come up with for this guy. But when he turned around Mac was gone. The *Grizzlies* managed to hold their opponent to a one run lead but couldn't come up with any runs of their own, and lost the game 6 to 5.

Mac caught up with Tree after pack-up. "Your pitching's not bad when there is someone to help you out."

"Three fastballs in a row down the center. No wonder the *Challengers* lose so many games. Surprised to see you here, Mac."

"Come to see my bud. Coffee?"

"Beer?"

"Coffee?"

"Let's go to my place. I'll have my beer and I'll make you a coffee. You're driving. I caught a ride here."

The drive to Tree's was filled exchanging baseball stories, interjected with occasional jabs and jokes, all therapeutic to Mac. Mac's visit surprised Tree, especially since he would be seeing Mac in Bryden Falls tomorrow night. And then he had it figured out! God was behind this! Sunday was his big exit, and God sent his boy to come to the rescue. This should be fun. Beer in hand, coffee brewing in the

kitchen, Tree strolled into his yard, Mac at his side, and leaned against the huge wooden crate with the removed bottom.

"What's this crate for?" Mac asked the obvious question.

"Brought it home from work. Never can tell when a guy might need a crate." Tree's tummy was tickling as he patted the box lovingly. Mac thought the beer was getting to his bud already.

You might as well give up, God. It ain't gonna' work. You think I'm a pretty bad dude, but there are three things I'm not: a liar, a thief and a coward. When telling one of my marine or baseball stories I stay within reasonable distance to the truth; other than taking the occasional sick day off for fishing, I have never stolen from my company; if I were facing a firing squad I would refuse the mask and sneer at my executioners. Nothing's going to stop me from doing what I'm going to do, regardless if those stories about hell are true. Sunday it's ten-four, over and out, end of the ninth, good-bye cruel world.

"Tell me Mac, why did you come to see me?" *As if I don't know!*

"I need a friend."

Perhaps Mac didn't hear me right! Tree was suddenly nervous. *Mac doesn't need anybody, especially me!* "Serious?"

"Serious." Suddenly Tree felt uncomfortable leaning against the wooden box; it wasn't funny anymore. "Let's get inside before the mosquitoes get us."

Pouring very black coffee into his pal's cup at the kitchen table, Tree didn't know what to do or say. This was the first time Mac needed him and he didn't want to blow it. "Beer's good. How's the coffee?"

"Horrible."

"You take it black, don't you?" *This isn't starting out too good.*

"You got the color right. It's everything else that's wrong. You actually drink this?"

"It wakes me up in the morning."

"This would wake a dead man."

"In the morning I feel like a dead man." Tree flicked open his cell and pushed some buttons that connected him to a taxi dispatcher. "Joe?……Tree Kenny…… Send a large coffee to my place, will you?…… Black…… Tell your man to go to the coffee shop closest to my house so it gets here hot…… Yep, I'm at the same place…… And, hey, a dozen donuts…… What kind? Mix them up…… Some sugary ones. I got a friend who needs sweetening…… I know it will be an expensive coffee. This dude's worth it. He saved my life once…… Well, that's a good point, maybe he didn't do me such a big favor…… Enough of the cute stuff…… And, hey, tell your driver not to expect a tip."

"Merciful friend." Mac slid his cup away from him.

"Sometimes when one of the guys on my team or at work have a problem they come to cry on Tree's shoulder. But pastors? Can't recall too many pastors coming to me for counsel. Vivian and the twins okay?"

"They're okay."

"You haven't been caught fooling around have you? Secretary maybe?"

"Vivian is my secretary."

"I know. Seriously, Mac, I didn't think you Christians had problems."

Mac looked at his friend incredulously. "You're kidding, right?"

"Well, you know…… I'm sure you guys have trouble finding a parking spot sometimes, like normal people. But not *big* problems." He wasn't joking, Mac realized.

It started slowly, stirring down deep in his belly, Mac tried valiantly to hold it down, but nothing was going to stop this eruption. Loud, riotous, uncontrollable laughter! The kind of laughter that comes only a few times in a lifetime. The kind of laughter that vibrates the entire body and makes you bend over in pain. Seeing Tree's offended expression, Mac did his best to control himself. "Sorry, bud."

Tree tried to defend himself. "Okay, so it's not nice to be on a losing team and not being able to sleep in on Sunday. But Christians don't know what *real* problems are."

Laughter came more forcefully than before, and Tree's bewildered look only worsened the problem. "Yes,……" Mac had trouble getting it out, "one time my shoelace…… became undone…… and I had to retie it! Right in the middle…… of a game!" Seeing his bud's contorted face and tears trickling out of his eyes stirred that same something in Tree's belly and he, too, could not restrain from laughing riotously.

"That's not a…… big problem…… pal! One time an old lady stopped me…… and pointed to a five-dollar bill…… that fell out of my pocket, and I had to…… I had to….. go back and pick it up!"

"Sometimes old ladies…… can be a real…… pain," Mac sympathized.

Soon they were into, "Do you remember this……?" and "Do you remember that…..?," going back to different ballgames and further back to marine life. When the taxi arrived the driver heard the two men roaring away their pent-up emotions, one from having his church disrupted and the other from his awaiting suicide, long before he saw them sitting limp on the kitchen floor, leaning on a wall.

monday, june 4th, 2007, 7:30 p.m.

Since television and video games have always been outlawed in the Tanner family, John and his four siblings were unusually sensitive to the valuables of life. Most days, at this time in the evening, they could and did observe Mom and Dad strolling hand in hand down the roadway and back again; it

was their time. John's habit was to sit by his bedroom window, reading or studying, glancing occasionally down the road, taking much comfort in his parents' love for one another. The younger ones downstairs would sporadically leave what they were doing, take a peek at their parents, and return to their whatever a little more assured. As long as Mom and Dad were holding hands everything would be okay.

"I had a visitor this morning."

"Vivian?" Reuben guessed.

"Vivian."

"I upset her."

"Your message upset her."

"Was she still distressed?"

"Very. She implied it would be best, for the good of the *Center,* we find another church to attend."

"I sympathize with her."

"I don't think Mac would condone her visit."

"Were the kids about when Vivian arrived?"

"John was. I explained the situation."

"Did he seem to understand?"

"As you know, John is trying to fit the pieces of his life together. This complicates things further."

"I feel him drifting away from me."

"It's natural to want to gain independence from his father."

"I mean spiritually. He's being tugged in another direction."

"I'm sensing that too. Reuben, let's not allow that to happen! Let's fight for our son …… in prayer!"

"He will be there on Sunday when I give the second half of my message. Let's pray he is influenced positively."

"Reuben, I feel strongly you won't be preaching Sunday!"

"Really? That could only mean one thing."

"I don't know what it means. I feel the Lord would have us be sensitive to Him these next few days. Very sensitive. Could you possibly take a week or so off work, to pray and seek direction?"

"You're quite concerned about this, aren't you?"

"Quite. I feel all of our family will be undergoing major adjustments. But what those adjustments are, I don't know."

"The business is going through a summer lull right now, and the new man I hired is working out quite well. I'll take two weeks off the tools and run the business from home."

"It will be good having you close."

"Maybe I could take your place as teacher a few hours a day to give you alone time with the Lord."

Jeni showed her appreciation by squeezing his hand. "There has been phone calls from church members."

"Complaints?"

"Not all. Several were complementary. It seems some have heard of our Wednesday nights and would like to come to hear more about Christ. One sister asked me if you always paused like that between sentences." They both laughed.

"Did you encourage them to come? This could complicate matters for Mac."

"I did what I believe was right in the sight of the Lord; I assured them they were welcome."

"You did well, but I will have to tell Mac. Where will we seat everyone?"

"We'll adjust the furniture. We can squeeze them in."

monday, june 4th, 2007, 9:15 p.m.

Katie had been sitting by the phone for more than two hours now, hoping to hear from John Douglas. She realized the conference could be pivotal, not only for John, but for her. She thought she understood what was not verbalized, that John would contact her if he made a decision to enter the ministry. This evening, the evening following his return, seemed a logical time.

In fact, of the two it was Katie who was the most impacted on the weekend. She wanted to tell John about it, about how she was deeply convicted by his father's lecture, about recommitting her life to Christ, about surrendering lead to Todd and apologizing to the others for her manipulating. And she wanted to share with John her determination to follow Christ, unconditionally, no strings attached.

But John didn't phone. Perhaps full time ministry isn't for him. Or maybe he will phone another time.

monday, june 4th, 2007, 11:45 p.m.

"Joe?..... Tree again. My bud needs another coffee..... Hey, make it two, two large blacks. I've had enough beer..... And another dozen donuts..... Just a minute..... Hey, Mac, do you want a pizza?..... Hey, Joe, tell your man to pick up a pizza first, will you?..... What do I want on it? Everything. What we don't like we'll scrape off..... Make it a large. Scrap the donuts..... And, hey, phone the order in

advance. I don't want the meter running while the driver's sitting around waiting..... No! Don't get the coffee at the pizza joint, they make worse coffee then I do..... Yea, that's right. Get it at the same place as before..... And hurry, will you? We're hungry."

Tree flicked his cell closed. "Laughing makes a guy hungry."

"Wish there was more laughter in the world."

"Don't get dreamy, Mac. There's not much to laugh about."

"I figure tomorrow I'll have something to laugh about."

"Tomorrow's game? Ha! We'll trounce you, good buddy."

"You can't psyche me out like you do some of those batters you face."

"Tomorrow I'll be seeing tears from crying instead of laughing."

"I won't be there."

"You're kidding!"

"An emergency board meeting tomorrow night."

"Sounds important. What's it about?"

"My church is going through a split."

"Is that bad?"

"Real bad, pal. Real bad."

"Darts?"

"Huh?"

"Darts?"

"Sounds good. But I warn you, I'm not bad. Kyle and I have thrown lots of darts in our rec room."

"You're not bad and I'm good. Baseball all over again." The dartboard was a permanent ornament on Tree's living room wall, as was the black mark on the floor, ten-foot distance, exposed only when the coffee table was moved.

So darts it was, two middle-aged ex-marines who would lay down their life for the other now jovial enemies intent on thrashing the other. It started off the best of three games, and when Mac was down two zip it was extended to best of five, and then seven, and when the pizza and coffee arrived Tree was up thirty to twenty-two, playing the best of sixty-five.

Sitting at the table Tree said, "So cry on my shoulder, pal. Tell ol' Tree your problems and I'll try my

best to not fall asleep." So Mac recounted the story, without mentioning names, beginning at Reuben's surprise request to speak to the congregation. Tree laughed vigorously when Mac got to the part when he asked Reuben what he would have done if Mac turned down his request - "Nothing. What could I do but accept your decision?" Not only was Mac not offended, he joined in Tree's hilarity. And from there it was a struggle to give the rest of the account as their laughter got increasingly more intense. Vivian's exit from the church *really* got to Tree. "You mean to tell me that Vivian, stoical and proper Vivian, walked out in the middle of the guy's sermon, like right down the aisle in front of a packed church?!" And they roared in merriment, not so much that it was all *that* funny, but because there was still lots of stuff inside both of them that needed to get out - Mac filled with regret and pain for his people, and Tree.....

Dozens of times in the past months Tree said final good-byes, in his imagination, to his prized teenagers. One time he kissed them on the forehead, turned and walked away before they saw his tears, another time he hugged them both at once refusing to let them go, another time he broke down in tears, telling them how sorry he was for being such a lousy father and could they forgive him. And then there was Sally. Sally should have done this years ago, permanently remove her and the kids from alcoholic Dad. He knew she loved him still, and couldn't fathom why. Though now she was but his ex, she was still the hub of his life, the only adult he never put down in jest. In a few days, Sunday at about 10 a.m., his family would be gone forever.

And hundreds of times Tree was lying in his dark tomb, pistol in hand, sweating, afraid, alone. He was sure he had the guts to pull the trigger. How long after the weight of the dirt smothered his body would he become unconscious? Two minutes max, he guessed. He must remember to deeply exhale before firing his gun to speed up the dying.

For Mac the entire night was therapeutic, exactly what he needed to free him from within pressure caused by guilt and anger and distress. Tears are medicine to the soul and, Mac supposed, his were legitimate man's tears released through laughter and not crying. For Tree this night was a farewell party to life. Mac had been one of the few good happenings in his adult years, and this was a fitting way to end a friendship. *Will he cry when I'm gone?* Tree wondered. He tried to picture Mac when he got the news of his drowning, overtaken in grief, sobbing uncontrollably. *No, that just ain't gonna' happen,* he had to, to his disappointment, conclude.

"Hey, Joe, still awake, eh?..... We could use another coffee..... Yea, that's what I said. Then I'm going to kick my bud out of here. He's got an hour drive home..... Home is on the other side, you know, the *cold* side, of the border. Is that coffee shop still open?..... Good..... That's right, two large blacks..... And tell your man to hustle."

More darts. More coffee. More slams and digs and jokes. Two in the morning, Mac was about to pull out of Tree's driveway.

"Thanks, Tree. I feel great. If I come across any other distressed pastors I'll send them this way."

"Do that. But tell them no freebies. Doctor Kenny ain't cheap."

"I'll tell every one of them."

"Hope you're not too high on caffeine to drive."

"Love you, Tree."

Normally Tree would respond with a, "Get out of here!" or maybe, "Sure, sure," but tonight it was, "Love you too, Mac."

tuesday, june 5th, 2007, 11:30 a.m.

Vivian had turned off the alarm clock Mac set for 8:00 a.m., knowing her husband could not function on four hours sleep, and Mac did not wake up until 10:30. It was a refreshed Mac who walked into his office Tuesday morning, insecurity and anxiety having been dumped on the other side of the border, and now he was on the offensive ready to confront the day. Vivian's list of return calls to be made had grown from thirty-seven to fifty-six. He calculated if he spent fifteen minutes on each call he would be on the phone until the early hours of the following day, and during that time more calls would be coming in. *It's time to take a vacation!* he decisively concluded. Pressing a button on his phone he was in contact with Phil Ferguson in his office down the hall. "Come and see me as soon as you can, Phil." Less than a minute Phil was in his office.

"Good morning, Mac."

"Good morning. I'm going to need help with these phone calls. If I speak to all these people I will be here all day and night, and I got a lot of work to do. I would like you to contact each person, tell them I am on a ten day vacation, I will address their concerns from the pulpit one week from Sunday, and if they have further concerns please contact me again by phone."

"Vacation? Are you and Vivian going somewhere?"

"No, but I've got to be free from all my usual responsibilities. I was planning a vacation in July but I'm taking it now instead. Let's call it a working vacation."

"Got it."

"Don't speak on my behalf. Ask everyone to be patient. Most people are sympathetic to a man's need for a vacation; I'm sure they will be understanding."

"Got it."

"Did you listen to the tape?"

"I did."

"And?"

"It was rough. I can understand the reaction. Have you had a chance to hear it?"

"Not yet. I'll have to before the meeting tonight. Did you manage to get in touch with everyone?"

"All the elders will be here at 7:00 p.m."

"Good job. Thanks."

"No problem."

"The burden of routine church affairs will fall on you the next ten days. Think you can handle it?"

"I can and I will."

"You will be at the game tonight?"

"Certainly."

"You will be head coach in my place."

"Got it."

"Kyle's pitching. The *Grizzlies* need this game to take first place in the league; they could be rough on my son; I wish I could be there."

"I wish you could, too."

"I had planned to let Kyle pitch tonight anyhow, and let the *Grizzlies* face him instead of me. They're used to me; this might throw them off their game. Kyle's arm is getting strong, and he and I have been working on his curve; it's wicked."

"And we also need a win on Friday."

"That one will be easier. We are the team in the league with the momentum, having won or tied the last five games. Tonight is the big one. If we take this game it will prove we can be a serious challenge to win the playoffs."

"A dream come true."

"Actually, more than I dared dream for at the beginning of the season. Now, I want you to appoint Reuben Tanner as your assistant tonight."

"Mac! Are you sure?"

"And I want you to heed any suggestions he might have. That man knows baseball."

"Got it. And I will let you know the result of the game as soon as it's over."

"You won't have to. I will know by the cheering, or lack of cheering, if we win or lose. I will be able to hear from the boardroom."

“Maybe I can catch the tail end of the meeting.”

“Be good if you can. I’m going to have Vivian forward all incoming calls to your office. You better get at those return calls.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mac pushed another button and, “Vivian? Could you come in here, please?”

A softer, more settled Vivian than Monday’s Vivian was soon in Mac’s office. “Did you sleep well?”

“I did. I feel great. I spent the night with Tree …… that is, Trevor Kenny.”

“How is Tree?” That was the first time she referred to Tree as Tree - a token of appeasement?

“Hmmm. You know, I never asked him. I guess for once I wanted a friend more than I wanted to be a friend. I should have inquired, showed some sympathy. His family will be moving away in a few days. He will be alone.”

“That’s so sad.”

“Could you bring in the recorder tape with all the phone messages?”

Soon Mac was pacing in his office, not a frantic pace, not even a worried pace, listening to serious concerns from his congregation.

“This is Ross, Ross Gilbert. I would like to talk to you, Pastor. My wife, too. We have concerns regarding Tanner’s speech. We would like to know where you stand. It was a very interesting speech. Just want to know what you think of it, that’s all.”

“Hello, Pastor Mac. How was your weekend at the conference? I want you to know how impacted I was by Reuben Tanner’s message. Unfortunately, Fred didn’t like it at all. He says he’s not going to be there Sunday but I’m sure I can talk him into it. Myself, I am hoping Reuben will be a regular speaker at our church, you know, once a month or something. I know a lot of people are upset, including Vivian, but I felt it right to voice my opinion. Thanks for choosing him to speak. I was thoroughly blessed.”

“Just phoning to see if Vivian is okay. I’m not sure if she walked out because of the message or she wasn’t feeling well. I’ve been talking to some of the girls and want you and Viv to know we, that is, most of us, are on your side, no matter what. Helen Fulbright.”

“Pastor Mac. I’ve been talking to several people to get their take on Reuben’s message. A bunch of us meet for coffee in the morning. Seems like it’s a sensitive subject. Some are quite upset, angry, talking about finding another church. Others think it was okay, just what our church needs. A real argument broke out. One guy from our church, I won’t mention who, stomped out the door without drinking the last half of his coffee. Myself, oh, this is Grant Howard speaking, I don’t know what to

think. I'm kind of unsettled about the whole thing. Please ask Vivian to arrange an appointment. 292-1907. Thank you."

"This message is for Pastor Mac from Morris McLelland. I listened to Reuben Tanner's tape after I got home from the service, not once but twice. I came to the conclusion that Reuben was blaming you and your superiors for the rough shape we are in spiritually. Of course, he didn't say that directly, but that seemed to be the gist of his message. I guess that's why Mrs. Maclin walked out on him. Anxious to hear from you on this matter. God bless. My number is 292-4575."

"I just want to say I've been paying my tithes faithfully for many years now. I thought I could trust my spiritual needs were being cared for. Now I don't know. It seems like when I stand before Jesus I won't be getting much rewards. And I've been so faithful to the church. Quite upset. My phone number is 292-4667."

"Hi, Pastor Mac, this is Maureen Edwards. I thought it interesting you chose a layman to speak on Sunday and was hoping you were going to make this a policy. I know my Shaun would make an excellent speaker. I think everyone at the *Center* would agree that few know the Bible as well as Shaun. Don't tell him I left this message, okay? God bless and have a good day."

It took a long time to listen to all the messages, and it was tiring. This would not be nearly so serious a problem if the calls were either all negative or all positive; Mac calculated the negatives outnumbered the positives four to one. What can he say or do to satisfy everyone?

Vivian walked in with a tray bearing a ham sandwich and a salad and a fruit drink. "Thought you probably had enough coffee for a while."

"You're right, enough for a week. By the way, we are on vacation."

"What do you mean?"

"I told Phil he would have to carry our responsibilities for a while. I've got to be able to think things out. This is a crucial time for the *Center,* and I've got to be on top of it."

"But what about your meeting tonight?"

"I'll be there. I am using my vacation to work out the Tanner problem. I got us into this jam; I've got to get us out."

"But what should *I* be doing?"

"You're on vacation. I suggest you go home, get away from all your responsibilities, be there for our kids, shop for a new dress, spend time with the Lord."

"A vacation at home." It was not a complaint.

"I'm sorry I messed up our summer plans. I guess I'm sorry for a lot of things."

"One thing matters right now, the welfare of our church."

"Do we have a portable cassette player, you know, the kind with earphones that clips on the belt? I have to listen to Reuben's tape, and I want to get out of the office, go for a walk."

"Both of the twins have one at home. I'll be back shortly."

Soon Mac was sitting on the bleachers overlooking the baseball diamond, earphones over his head. The first sound on the tape was that of Jeni's garbled voice in the background, praying for her husband. As her voice got louder and more pitched, it came across as frenzied and eerie. Mac was not impressed.

And then it was Reuben: "May the name of the Lord Jesus Christ be glorified! I asked for and received permission from Brother Maclin to speak to you two successive Sundays."

Click! Mac hit the off button. *Thanks, Roo,* he said to himself. *You could have said* Pastor *Maclin or* Pastor *Mac. Thanks for undermining me before my entire congregation.*

Recorder off, Mac's thoughts drifted to tonight's game. He ached to be here where he belonged, leading his team into battle. The bleachers on the home team side would be full, everyone knowing the importance of this game. And during the game people would be having their own game, the *negatives* versus the *positives,* each subtly trying to score points and win over the other side. Mac was sure the *Grizzlies* would bring a bus load of fans, noisy, riotous fans, that would try to intimidate the umpires and the *Challengers.* They needed this game, their reputation, their ego, their very *worth* at stake.

Walking around the park he clicked the player on again.

"I say again this message is for most, not all." *No, Roo!* Mac imagined himself speaking to the plumber, *You just don't say things like that! No wonder our church is divided!*

"2 Corinthians 5:10: We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ." Mac was perturbed by the lengthy pauses, trying to imagine how intimidated his people must have felt. "We must *all* appear before the judgment seat of Christ!" *Why does he feel he has to repeat himself?* "We must *all* appear before the judgment seat of Christ!" *Okay, Roo, we get it already!*

"In my opinion you are *not ready* to give an account to Christ." *Wow! A plumber has some inside information the rest of us don't have! Surely he's not going to say it again.* "You are *not ready* to give an account to Christ." *Oh, great! Surely not a third time!* "You are *not ready* to give an account to Christ.

"In my opinion, my friends, most of your works are wood, hay, and straw. They will be consumed by fire." *Ouch! No wonder Vivian walked out! Most of the works he's referring to have been done through the* Center *under my direction and ministry!*

"You speak what is in your heart, and you rarely speak Christ." *Click! That's just not true!* Mac

considered Reuben's laughable comment. It would be easy to prove Reuben wrong, all he had to do was check his memory. He thought about encounters with individuals from his congregation, trying to recall hearing someone speak of Christ. He couldn't. Yes, some mentioned *God* a few times, but not *Jesus*. But how could he be expected to remember?

Click. "During our work day in the park I never heard the name of Jesus mentioned once." *Click! That's quite an accusation, pal!* Mac was getting increasingly irritated with his back catcher. He was determined to recall at least one time when someone spoke the name of Jesus Christ. He had made the rounds from one person to another that day; he was in the kitchen, the yards, washrooms, baseball diamond, everywhere. He parked himself under a large elm, determined not to move until he remembered at least *one* occasion when he, or someone, mentioned the Name. Finally he thought of the blessing before their meal that he ended with, "In the name of Jesus, Amen." But he had to admit that didn't really count.

He was up on his feet, exiting the park, walking the streets. He thought about his family, recalling various scenarios - sitting around the meal table, driving here and there, in the rec room, fishing with Kyle, in the living room with Katie, talking church affairs with Vivian. To his exasperation, he could not remember the name of Christ being mentioned.

What about the convention, still fresh in his mind? His quickened pace did nothing to help him recall the Name being mentioned as each speaker rolled through his mind. Phil purchased the tapes; Mac would have to borrow and scrutinize them. *Surely, surely,* he inwardly reasoned, *the name of Christ must have been mentioned at a conference of pastors, appointed leaders of Christ's flock!* Leaning on a concrete bridge overlooking one of the small tributaries soon to make its way to the great falls, Mac considered his own message. He couldn't make his memory evoke one instance of the use of Jesus' name. And then he happily called to mind the communion service. *Oh yes, the name of Jesus was lifted up several times! What a sweet time it was, everyone enjoying the Presence. Praise the Lord!*

Mac broke into a jog, earphones around his neck, thinking about his many messages to his congregation at the *Center.* Yes, he did remember quoting Jesus occasionally, and using Him as an example of righteous living. His relief, however, was as minimal as the few times he could recollect using the Name.

Only the one having little perception of human temperament would conclude that such a revelation would be accompanied by remorse. If man were so easily affected by truth the world would be less messy. Mac's defenses went up, entering fully into denial, dismissing the matter as inconsequential, and returned to his anger against the insensitive plumber.

Back in the bleachers Mac fast-forwarded the pauses and the repeated statements, quickly bringing him to the end of Reuben's message. He told Roo he would listen to the tape, didn't promise to *hear* - he kept his word. Back in his office he was on the intercom: "Phil, please arrange a meeting for me with Reuben Tanner, preferably tomorrow afternoon in my office." Time for a showdown.

CHAPTER SEVEN

tuesday, june 5th, 2007, 6:15: p.m.

Already the bleachers on the home-team side were beginning to fill, such the importance of this game. Baseball is not a male-thing-only at the *Center;* over the years many women embraced the *Challengers* as theirs too, and female attendees often outnumbered the men.

More than anything, Sunday service excluded, baseball was responsible for the bonding of the congregation. Baseball is fun, and the spring and summer gatherings of the fans made the workweek much more pleasant, not just the game but the camaraderie, the peanuts and sunflower seeds and soft drinks and coffee, the bleacher discussions on last week's service and other church matters, and maybe arguments over the latest happening in televangelism. The baseball players considered the fans as part of the team. After giving low fives and handshakes to the opposing team at the end of the game, they lined up a second time to greet the fans with *high* fives and occasional hugs.

All were aware of the import of this game. Win tonight, and they had a good chance at making the playoffs. Win tonight, and everyone would fear them, knowing they were able to beat the best. Win tonight, and they had a fair shot at becoming the 2007 champions. Win tonight, and the shame of past years poor performances could be erased.

But still the game was quite secondary to the Tanner question. Reuben Tanner totally disrupted their sameness and security, an unexpected tempest that would not soon pass. Like the players now going through their warm-up on the field, the fans were experiencing the butterflies, the conflict in the stands as real as the one on the diamond.

Katie Maclin arrived a half-hour early to enjoy the anticipation of the game. Mom told her Dad would miss the game because of an emergency board meeting; knowing the need for a win, this disappointed her, but more, she carried a concern for the church, her nucleus since a child. She saved seats for the other vocalists of the *MorLord Worship Band* --- Tanya, Marie and Todd. They were closer than ever since Katie relinquished lead to Todd on Sunday and apologized to her colleagues for her manipulation. She had not yet apologized to Kyle and John, Kyle because he left the service early and had since avoided her, and John who she hasn't seen since before the convention. Sometimes the four vocalists practiced during the game by humming or quietly singing praise songs in harmony, this to the enjoyment of nearby *Challengers* fans.

How smart the *Challengers* looked in their light-gray, striped uniforms and black caps, Katie thought as she watched the infielders pick up practice grounders and smartly throw to first base, much classier than the gaudy brownish-red and bright blue uniforms of the *Grizzlies.* Kyle would be pitching tonight, and Katie hoped the *Grizzlies* would just play ball and not try to intimidate him. She had to admit most of her attention would not be on the pitcher tonight, but the shortstop. *Oh, if we could just talk again, like that work day under the elm. Why didn't he phone me after the conference?*

Did he decide to not enter the ministry? John Douglas, it doesn't matter anymore!..... Maybe he's just not interested in me. She knew her brother would not make an arrangement like he did before, his loyalty being with Mom and Dad, no longer sure he wanted a Tanner for an in-law. *Things are turning ugly,* Katie thought a woeful thought. Tomorrow night and Thursday night John would be at band practice preparing for Saturday's big event, but her brother would be watchful they don't have alone time. With sadness Katie thought of her brother and John, their lifetime friendship seemingly at risk.

The *Grizzlies* fans arrived in what was once an orange school bus, now rusty and dirty and tilting to one side, as the *Challengers* were having their infield practice. Their loud laughter as they climbed out of the bus was an indication they had been drinking on the way. It could be quite a night.

Tree was doing what coaches do, chewing a big wad of gum, going over the batting order, making sure everyone knew the signals, lining the equipment in front of the dugout, barking orders, making his presence felt. Tree was the only one who knew this was his last game, not only of the season but his life. He would miss the playoffs, but he badly wanted another trophy for top spot of the regular season, which he intended to take to the grave with him as proof his life had not been an entire flop. He felt bad for Mac, knowing his bud wanted this game bad to make the playoffs for the first time, but this was war, and in war there is no mercy.

Tree realized his team was aging, not having young replacements other teams were picking up, this because many youngsters coming up from minor leagues did not want to join the tacky *Grizzlies.* So Tree's team relied heavily on cunning and intimidation, when necessary, and knowing Mac's boy was on the mound, hoped it would not be necessary tonight.

It galled Phil Ferguson to have to ask Reuben to assist him as coach; it galled him further that Reuben was a better coach than he, and the team would look to him for leadership. Baseball is a battle of the mind, a battle of the heart, a battle of the will, and on all three Phil was mediocre, far below his counterpart in the other dugout. He was assistant coach only because he was assistant pastor, others more qualified passed over, such the demands of church politics. He would try his best to put on an air of confidence, but putting on is never a substitute for being. The *Grizzlies* were expert at sensing a weakness and exploiting it to the fullest. Phil was in for a real battle.

Kyle Maclin was throwing practice pitches to Reuben Tanner. Usually Kyle submitted to Reuben's signals; tonight would be different. If it were not for Mr. Tanner his dad would be here tonight, coaching, leading, encouraging. If it were not for Mr. Tanner his mom and her protest departure would not be the talk of the *Center,* and he and his sister would not be alienated. If it were not for Mr. Tanner his dad's church would not be going through an upheaval. Yielding to Mr. Tanner's signals would be a betrayal to his father; he would rather lose.

Jeni Tanner was seated behind the *MorLord* singers with four of her children, the oldest sixteen, the youngest eleven. The June evening was cloudless and warm, the cool breeze refreshing, and yet every part of her knew she was in the middle of a storm. As important as this game was to the fans it

was secondary to the controversy encircling her husband. When the breeze occasionally lulled or shifted she could pick up pieces of conversation that had nothing to do with baseball. Questions and subsequent conjectures bounced back and forth."Where is Pastor Mac? I heard he is at an emergency board meeting …… Did Tony Borric resign or was he asked to leave? I don't think he was happy about Reuben Tanner preaching …… Did you hear Pastor Mac is on vacation? Maybe it's got something to do with Vivian walking out of church …… Who's going to preach on Sunday? I don't think the board is going to let Tanner speak again. Look what happened last time …… Etc., etc."

And Jeni sensed the division was also on the playing field, brother against brother. The advantage of unity, always more prevalent than the opposing team, had been blown away in an hour sermon.

Almost directly in front of Jeni was the girl her son wanted as his wife, of this she was now certain. What price John would be willing to pay for her, Jeni was not sure. Would he change the direction of his life? Would he compromise? Would he surrender the lordship of Jesus Christ? Jeni would have been comforted had she known of Katie's encounter with Christ as a result of Reuben's forthright words and her apology to the band.

Reuben and Mac were the two rocks on which the *Challengers* found security. It was not their athleticism alone, both in their early forties were nearing the end of their baseball playing careers, but their inner strength and savvy. Neither could be shaken and the *Grizzlies,* as well as other teams, knew it.

But one of the rocks was absent and quite annoyed at the other, and the other under a heavy load, the center of controversy. He preached Christ to his friends and, to his surprise and dismay, division resulted. He coupled tomorrow's appointment with Mac, arranged by Phil, with Jeni's prediction he would not be preaching on Sunday, and concluded the second half of his message would never be delivered. *But Lord, it* has *to be!* he prayed as he returned the ball to Kyle.

John Douglas would have to work as hard as any to stay focused on the game. He would have to forget about Katie sitting in the bleachers, wondering if things were okay between them. And he would have to stop looking up through the backstop fencing where he could see the church building where the board of elders will soon be gathered to make a decision regarding his father. He would have to stop feeling embarrassed for his dad and the shame accompanying that embarrassment. Two days ago he was on his way home from a conference soaring with expectations; now his world was crumbling. To go the way he was determined meant a separation from the man most influential in his life, his father - the one he most respected, a possible exception being Pastor Mac. Also there was tension between him and Kyle, and wasn't sure why. There was tension between Kyle and Katie's mom and his mom, their dad and his dad, his dad and at least some of the board members. Did all this mean it was over, if it really did begin, between him and Katie?

Concentrate! he scolded himself. *We need this game!*

"Batter!" The umpire was impatient to get the game underway.

Kyle ignored the back catcher's signals, depending on his own prowess to get the job done. Reuben was impressed with Kyle's improved curve; he also knew if he threw it too often the batters would catch on and smoke it. Kyle struck out the first three batters and his confidence swelled. The *Challengers* got two runs their first time at bats, and things were looking sweet, sweet, sweet.

The top of the third inning, score now four zip and the *Grizzlies* very not happy, brought Spike to the batters box. Spike was mean, Spike wanted this game, Spike knew how to intimidate. He deliberately deflected one of Kyle's pitches with his meaty arm, and pretended to be infuriated with the pitcher for deliberately hitting him. He headed straight for Kyle, bat in hand, yelling profanities and threats at the lad. The *Challengers* fielders rushed to Kyle's rescue like Spike knew they would, the *Grizzlies* came pouring out of their dugout rushing the mound like Spike knew they would, the *Grizzlies* fans roared their protest at Kyle like Spike knew they would, and for the rest of the game Kyle was off his game --- like Spike knew he would be. Kyle's pitches were less authoritative after that encounter, and the *Grizzlies,* getting used to Kyle's curve, began to hit.

The umpire ordered Spike to first base, a consolation for being hit, and the next batter smoked the ball between third base and shortstop; fortunately John managed to catch it in the air, low to the ground, for the first out. The next batter hit a hard grounder to the *Challengers* second baseman who neatly flicked it to John the shortstop to get Spike, rushing to second base, on a force play for the second out. Spike, knowing he was out, slid into second with one of his cleated shoes high in the air to keep John from making a double play. It didn't work. John smartly sidestepped Spike, threw to first in time to get the third out, and immediately headed for the dugout leaving Spike sprawled atop second base, dusty and looking silly.

tuesday, june 5th, 2007, 7:00 p.m.

It was a somber group of seven that met around the boardroom table, the closed Bible a reminder they had lost one of their comrades over the Tanner issue. Mac suggested they spend fifteen minutes in prayer before opening the meeting, which turned out to be over a half hour. The elders sensed only God could fix this mess, and were fervent in their appeal to Him. And then.....

Terry Maclin: So let's get at it, my brothers. It seems our church is in a crisis. I must admit I was overwhelmed, on returning from the convention, by the suddenness of the storm. I take full responsibility for the predicament we are in. I suggest we continue to lean heavily on the Lord, trusting Him to bring us through with unity restored. Sheldon?

Sheldon Waters: Thank you, Pastor. I don't think anyone here is going to let you bear the responsibility alone.

Everyone: That's right! Amen!

Sheldon Waters: At our last meeting we were unsuccessful at coming to an agreement regarding

Tanner's appeal to reverse Pastor Mac's decision. We unanimously agreed that Pastor Mac would make the final decision, assuring him we would back him up on any decision he made. Pastor Mac, could you give us an update, telling us why you decided to grant Tanner permission?

Terry Maclin: Be happy to. One reason I turned Reuben down originally was because I don't believe anyone who is not accountable warrants the pulpit. I was certainly not convinced God spoke to Reuben to give a message to the congregation. As Donald pointed out at our last meeting, God is orderly and does not work that way. To think otherwise is to deny the validity of our denomination, or any denomination for that matter. However, my inclination was to let Reuben speak simply because I thought less damage would be done by saying yes than no. As you know, Reuben has the affection and respect of many. Saying no could cause serious complications. I didn't think he would just drop the matter; his appeal to the board to overturn my decision was an indication he was determined to reach the people one way or another; this would cause a conflict, a conflict that would hurt everyone. Before giving permission I inquired of Reuben the topic of his message, and his answer, relationship and accountability to Christ, seemed harmless enough. Also, I told him to never again ask permission to speak to the congregation.

I feel obligated to tell you, after giving Reuben permission I asked him what he would have done had I said no. I will never forget his response. He looked at me quizzically and said, "What would I do? Nothing. What could I do but accept your decision?"

Brent Anderson: You mean to say, if you had asked him *prior* to giving him permission rather than *after,* we would not be in this mess …… that is, this situation?

Terry Maclin: That's what I'm saying.

Everyone: Silence.

Sheldon Waters: Well, the fact is we are in a …… situation. Where do we go from here? Everyone was at the service on Sunday except Pastor Mac. I know we have all been on the phone with each other voicing our opinions. Now we should voice those opinions before everyone. Let's go around the table. Donald?

Donald Williamson: Tomas, a while back you asked me, "Why do you want to shut us up? What are you afraid of?" I think it's obvious to everyone why I wanted to put a lid on this thing. Some subjects should be avoided. Challenging church policy can do more harm than good.

Now regarding Tanner's *performance:* as I said before, you can evaluate anything by its fruit. We can clearly see the fruit of this thing is bad. The man speaks for an hour and our church is split. Where do we go from here? We make it a policy to never allow a layman to speak from our pulpit again - under any circumstances!

Some others: Amen!

Sheldon Waters: David, would you like to respond to Donald's remarks?

David Tomas: Respectfully decline.

Sheldon Waters: Nelson, your turn.

Nelson Chesney: I am very upset for our church. I've been here a long time, I've grown to love the people, and now I see friendships tested, people confused. We made a mistake. Looking back, we should have relied more upon the wisdom of others, and I'm referring to our denomination, instead of departing from policy.

Shaun Edwards: Reuben Tanner's words brought me, literally, to my knees. He opened my eyes. The veil has been lifted. I had departed from Christ and didn't know it. Now I've returned, never to leave His side again. I agree with Donald, we can evaluate by the forthcoming fruit. For both me and my wife the fruit has been very good.

Brent Anderson: While I'm happy for you, Shaun, I am also disappointed we are again divided. I suggest we stop evaluating. Let this thing blow over. Let's get back to church as usual.

David Tomas: It won't happen, Brent. Our church will never be the same. I feel I must report that a number of our people will be attending Reuben's Wednesday night gathering, undoubtedly a direct result of his pulpit ministry.

Nelson Chesney: What?! Tanner must have made it known he was holding meetings! He double-crossed us!

David Tomas: Actually, not. I think I am the one responsible. Like everyone here, I got concerned phone calls. I inadvertently mentioned Reuben's gathering a few times and, obviously, the news spread.

Donald Williamson: Are you going to attend?

David Tomas: No. I heard your concerns at the last meeting. I will have to make it a matter of prayer. But my wife will be attending.

Donald Williamson: Why don't you stop her?

David Tomas: I will not discourage her from attending. And that is to our advantage, is it not? This way I will be able to convey to the board the number of people from the *Center* that do attend.

Donald Williamson: What's your guess? How many of our people do you think will be there?

David Tomas: I don't know. Five? Fifteen? I really don't know.

Donald Williamson: Fifteen?!

Brent Anderson: Man, this is serious stuff! Is this the beginning of the *Center's* demise? How many will

attend *next* week? How do we know Tanner won't start his own church?

Nelson Chesney: Pastor Mac, can't you talk to Reuben? Reason with the man?

Terry Maclin: I can try. I arranged an appointment with Reuben for tomorrow. However, it is obvious he has little confidence in my leadership; why should we expect him to cooperate? We must pray fervently for the Lord to work this out. Much is at stake. We have impacted our community in various ways, all positive. Will we lose our witness? Will Bryden Falls no longer have a group of people who can live in harmony as a witness to the reality of the love of God? Sheldon, I would like to say a few words about the convention.

Sheldon Waters: Please do, Pastor.

Terry Maclin: I was impressed by the unity, the commitment of my peers to each other and to leadership. Our denomination has grown by thirty percent in the last ten years. I believe this success is a fruit of pastors living in unity, bowing to the wisdom of our superiors at head office. Personally, I have renewed my commitment to the people to whom I am accountable. I cannot expect others to submit to my leadership unless I, in turn, submit to others. In the future I will maintain closer contact with my seniors. Had I asked for their advice before giving Reuben the okay, our congregation would not be divided today.

Donald Williamson: That's Godly wisdom, Pastor Mac!

Others: Amen!

Terry Maclin: Further, I think, in time, we ought to clarify the function and responsibility of this board of elders, as well as its limitations, if any. While the board has final authority at the *Center,* I am under the authority of the denomination that holds my credentials. It seems to me, as a matter for future consideration, the board should decide if it, too, should place itself under the same power I am under, for the sake of unity and for the sake of practical functioning.

Donald Williamson: Godly wisdom!

Some: Amen!

Sheldon Waters: Thank you, Pastor. I think that brings us close to the end of our meeting. I make a motion that, from this time forward, no non-credentialed person speak from our pulpit. Perhaps we can catch the last of the ballgame!

David Tomas: Does that include this coming Sunday?

Donald Williamson: Of course it does! Who knows how many people will be at the Tanners next week if he gets the pulpit a second time! Refusing to let him give the second half of his message is making a strong statement to the congregation that we collectively oppose Tanner!

Sheldon Waters: Okay, around the table.

Donald Williamson: I certainly agree.

Nelson Chesney: I strongly agree.

Shaun Edwards: I reluctantly agree.

Brent Anderson: I agree.

David Tomas: I reluctantly agree.

Sheldon Waters: I agree.

Terry Maclin: I disagree.

tuesday, june 5th, 2007, 8:00 p.m.

The score at the top of the fifth was *Grizzlies* five, *Challengers* four, Kyle's curve no longer a menace to their powerful hitters. Kyle lacked Reuben's experience in outsmarting the batter, yet he refused to accept his signals. His shoulders drooped under the razzing of the *Grizzlies* fans. Roo could see the umpire was also weakening under their intimidating jeers and Tree's constant complaining from his dugout, and could tell that, to appease them, the ump called the close ones balls instead of strikes. This meant Kyle had to throw more pitches and his arm was tiring. It was time for a pitcher change, John, the number three hurler, the logical choice, but Phil seemed paralyzed with indecision.

The first batter Kyle faced was Spike. Nervous to hit him again, the umpire giving the close ones to the batter, Spike got a walk to first. Spike was determined not to be the victim of a double play again. The next on the *Grizzlies* line-up did the same as in the third inning and hit the ball to the second baseman, another double play looking imminent. This time, however, the ball spun crazily, and the second baseman had trouble gripping the ball. Spike ran by him heading to second when he finally made the throw to John waiting at second base. Spike again slid, full force and one leg high, into second catching John's leg at the knee just as John was releasing the ball in an attempt to beat the runner to first. *Crack!* went the ugly sound that could be heard throughout the infield. John went heavily to the ground landing flat on his back. When Spike saw the bottom half of John's leg lying perpendicular to his outstretched body the big man was instantly remorseful. "I didn't mean to! I didn't mean to! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! God, I'm sorry!"

John's throw to first was wild, skipping past the first baseman. Roo was doing his job, being where he was supposed to be, covering the first baseman and now scrambling for the loose ball. Jeni and Katie stood and screamed, "John!" at the same instant. Everyone on both bleachers was soon on their feet, many with hands covering their mouths, aghast at the leg that lay stupidly at a ninety-degree angle from John's body. Reuben picked up the loose ball, the umpire yelled time out, the fielders ran to their fallen shortstop, and it was then that Reuben could see, between the legs of the players around him, his son lying on the ground.

"No, Roo, don't look!" the first base ump stood between John and the back catcher heading towards his son. Reuben grabbed the portly man by his blue shirt, lifting him effortlessly out of his path, and soon was kneeling at his son's side.

Phil Ferguson yelled, "Find someone with a cell phone and call 9-1-1!" Someone else yelled, "He needs a jacket to prop his head!" And someone else, "We need an ambulance now!"

"Quiet!" Reuben yelled at both the *Challengers* and the *Grizzlies* that rushed to the injured number sixteen. He then stood up and rotated a friendly gaze at each one. "Quiet," he said calmly this time. And then he turned to his son, face sweaty and grimacing.

"John," he said gently, "in the name of Jesus Christ, get to your feet." Though John's eyes were locked to his father's he could barely focus, a confounded look on his face.

"John Douglas!" Reuben said more emphatically, as a stern father would speak to a distracted son. "Obey your father! In the name of Jesus Christ, get to your feet."

And that's what John did, no help from anyone.

"Oh, my God!" said a few of the ballplayers. "Oh, my God!" could be heard throughout the bleachers. "Did you see that?!" more than one exclaimed. "I thought the kid broke his leg!" said an excited *Grizzlies* fan.

Jeni wanted to run to her son. Katie wanted to run to her friend. Tree, genuinely pained for the wounded shortstop, wanted to run to his opponent. But each stood speechless in their place, the umpire yelled, "Let's play ball!" and Roo returned to his post behind the plate.

Phil said to John, "You better sit the rest of the game," as he waved a substitute into the field.

"But Pastor Phil! I'm okay! I really am! The Lord healed me! I want to ……"

"The dugout, John!" Phil said emphatically. The realm of church politics stretched into the baseball diamond; a miracle at Reuben Tanner's hand would not be a good thing for the *Center* at this time. "I don't want any complications to your injury."

John submissively walked to the dugout, on the way glancing wonderingly towards his father, squatted and masked, behind home plate, intent as always at doing his job.

tuesday, june 5th, 2007, 8:10 p.m.

Terry Maclin: Disagree.

Donald Williamson: What?!

Nelson Chesney: No, Pastor!

Brent Anderson: You disagree, Pastor? I thought I heard you say it was a mistake to have a layman

preach on Sunday mornings?

Sheldon Waters: Okay, everyone! Let's give Pastor Mac opportunity to explain his position. Pastor?

Terry Maclin: Thank you. I gave Reuben my word he could speak to the congregation two successive Sundays. Though I since regret that decision I nonetheless am obligated to keep my word.

Donald Williamson: No! Absolutely not! The church is being split before our very eyes and we are going to allow the man to come back to do more damage? I say no! Unthinkable!

Brent Anderson: The way I see it, Pastor Mac, you are cleared if we, the board, reverse our decision to let Tanner speak.

Sheldon Waters: Correction, Brent. We never gave our okay. We could not come to a conclusion and asked Pastor Mac to make the final decision.

Brent Anderson: So let's come to a conclusion right now! If we agree Tanner does not preach Pastor Mac is cleared. It is not Pastor Mac breaking his word; it is the board overruling him.

Sheldon Waters: We have never overruled the pastor; are we sure we want to do that?

Brent Anderson: Only by Pastor Mac's approval. It will get him out of the predicament of being bound by his word. This is an extreme matter and it seems to call for a delicate approach.

Donald Williamson: I agree. Let's do what it takes to protect our people.

Shaun Edwards: I could never agree to such a thing! As Pastor Mac gave his word to Reuben we likewise gave our word to Pastor Mac, to back him up on any decision he made.

David Tomas: At the beginning of this meeting we asked the Lord to get us out of this crisis. It seems to me breaking our word is no way to attain His help.

Donald Williamson: This is madness! The man speaks for an hour, brings schism to our assembly, and we actually entertain the possibility of welcoming him back! "Come on, Tanner! Let's see how much more pain and confusion and division you can cause! Make it good now, you only get one more chance!" Madness!

Sheldon Waters: I see we are divided again.

Nelson Chesney: I suppose if we forbid him to speak we are admitting to everyone we made a mistake. Everyone knows he was given permission to speak two successive Sundays. Saying no now will be quite controversial and perhaps even inflammatory.

Shaun Edwards: I appreciate your comment, Nelson, but could I suggest we, as a board, learn to put right over expediency?

Donald Williamson: What is that supposed to mean?

Shaun Edwards: The Bible always seems to speak of right versus wrong; we often make decisions by what is practical and what is impractical.

Donald Williamson: Does the Bible teach us to throw common sense out the window?

Nelson Chesney: Now we are back to the Bible again!

David Tomas: Personally, I think that's a good place to be. I ask everyone at this table to think back to Reuben's message. What did Reuben say in his discourse that was contrary to the Bible?

Donald Williamson: Okay, let's play this little game. I will go first. At the very beginning of his - okay, let's be generous and use the term *discourse* - Tanner referred to Pastor Mac as *Brother* Maclin, not, *Pastor* Maclin! This is not showing respect for the one in leadership, as the Bible tells us to do, nor the office he holds. He set a bad example before the entire church!

Nelson Chesney: I picked that up too.

David Tomas: Shaun?

Shaun Edwards: I've said it before; the Bible gives no example of calling a man Pastor, nor any other title. I don't see obeying the Bible is being disrespectful to Pastor Mac or the position he holds.

Donald Williamson: Okay, let's see you duck this one. The Bible teaches us not to judge one another. Tanner judged everyone! He insinuated he knew who was prepared for the judgment seat of Christ and who is not. Also, the Bible tells us to speak the truth; he did not speak the truth when he said most of us were not doing well, our works will be consumed by fire. The Bible tells us to be gentle; can anyone here say he was gentle? He was being vindictive!

Sheldon Waters: Nelson and Brent, could you respond to Donald's statements? I would like to hear from both of you.

Brent Anderson: I remember Tanner saying, "In my opinion." He was stating an opinion. Obviously he has a deep conviction we are not doing well. I guess we should be asking ourselves, "Are we?"

Nelson Chesney: I can't say he was harsh, though he had some very harsh things to say. His mannerism was actually gentle. I saw love, certainly not malice. However, I think it was a mistake to let him speak, and it would be another mistake to let him speak again. I disagree we, as a congregation, are not doing well. I think it is obvious we are the most giving and fruitful church in town. An example, on Saturday night the *MorLord Worship Band* will be performing to hundreds of citizens of Bryden Falls. It took years to build up the trust the community has for us.

Sheldon Waters: Thank you, brothers. Anyone?

David Tomas: Reuben Tanner was admonishing us to develop a deeper relationship with the Lord

Jesus Christ. That was the crux of his message. Because many were offended by that word is no reason to reverse our decision. How many people were offended by the words of Christ? - yet He did not alter His message.

Donald Williamson: You still don't get it, do you Tomas? Reuben Tanner was undermining our pastor before the entire congregation. Assuming the church is in such bad shape, as Tanner suggests, who is considered responsible? Who will the people blame? Their trust in Pastor Mac has been badly undermined. Allowing him to do a repeat performance will further harm the confidence they have in our pastor.

The arguments went around and around the table. It was obvious to Mac the board would not be able to come to a conclusion, and again he would be left to make the final decision. And he was determined to keep his word.

tuesday, june 5th, 2007, 8:30 p.m.

Sixth inning. The *Challengers* were down by two runs. John's absence was a blow to his team and Kyle was tiring, his curve had less curve and bases were loaded from batters patiently waiting for Maclin to walk them. The inexplicable incident with the *Challengers* shortstop doused the frenzy of the unruly *Grizzlies* fans but not for long, and now every pitch from Kyle was accompanied with taunts. Finally Phil, considered the number four pitcher behind Mac, Kyle and John, took over at the mound.

Sitting by himself in the dugout, John went over and over the last inning. He had never seen a healing miracle before, and had to convince himself that it was more than a fantasy, it really happened. As he rubbed his leg at the knee, not because of any pain but simply to convince himself the healing was real, questions came. *Why am I sitting in this dugout when the team needs me? I should be pitching. Why wasn't Pastor Phil thrilled that my leg was healed? Why wasn't Kyle, my lifelong friend, ecstatic? Why aren't the other guys slapping me on the back and telling me how relieved they are I'm not hurt?*

Phil let in three more runs before the team got the third out, the score now nine to four. Fortunately, the *Grizzlies* pitcher was also tiring, and the *Challengers* managed to fill the bases, mostly with walks. There were two out when number twenty-one came to the plate. John noticed no one in the dugout was cheering his dad. *Why?* The *Challengers* fans in the bleachers would normally be chanting, "Roo! Roo! Roo!" But not tonight. John watched his father at bat, trying to peer inside the man as he had many times over the years - the man he once idolized but from whom, in the last year or so, had drifted - trying to make sense of the controversy surrounding him. There he was in a perfect batters stance so familiar to John, fearlessly crowding the plate as always, wise and determined and patient, outwaiting the pitcher. The pitcher knew Reuben was dangerous but if he walked him the runner on third base would automatically score a run. With the count three balls and one strike, the pitcher tried to throw a fastball pass Roo. A mistake. Roo outguessed him and had predetermined to swing.

Whack! The ball soared over the right fielders head and over the fence, a grand slam home run!! The score was much more respectable now, nine to eight.

The *Challengers* met Roo at home plate with high fives as was custom when someone got a home run, but there was a reluctance. Reuben got them back into the game; they should have been jumping for joy. *Why?* John asked himself. *Why?*

And then he saw the obvious. *Cheering* Reuben Tanner could be seen as *siding with* Reuben Tanner; siding with Reuben Tanner could be interpreted as betrayal to Pastor Mac.

John had only listened to a part of his dad's Sunday message on tape, sort of listened, a dutiful and somewhat curious son, but not a son anticipating anything significant from his plumber-dad. Mrs. Maclin had told his mom the message seriously undermined Pastor Mac and the confidence the people had in his leadership. *Is this what it comes down to, pastor versus plumber? Not truth versus error? Not right versus wrong?*

And then he realized an obvious: *Pastor Phil doesn't want the people to know I am healed! That would be an endorsement of Dad and his message! And that's why I'm sitting in this dugout! It's making a statement to the people I'm not really healed! If I were healed I would be playing ball! It's not right! It's not fair!*

Seventh inning. John Douglas was staring at the masked catcher squatted under the powerful mercury vapor lights fending off the enclosing June dark, but it was also himself he was looking into, a rare introspection spurred by the miracle healing. *Few in my church, few in the* entire world, *have been blessed as I have been!* Tears leaked out of his eyes as he thought of his idyllic world at the ranch, the daily tokens of a mother's love, sounds of happy laughter with brothers and sisters. He recalled the many family weekend excursions on horseback to the backcountry, the numerous nights around campfires, eating and singing and praising Jesus, the many times lying awake in his sleeping bag staring at the brilliant stars, appreciating God as his parents taught him to do.

John remembered the time Dad challenged the five kids to build a guest house, all by themselves, no help from Dad or Mom except for direction, advice and encouragement. It was a challenging undertaking, many would say a task too large for those so young. First, the blueprints; draw them up, all five involved, and get them approved by the building department in Bryden Falls. Then the excavation; Reuben helped John master the rented excavator transported to the ranch on a huge truck. Then the foundation; the budget didn't allow for ready-mixed concrete to be hauled that far from town; they all experienced sore muscles from feeding the concrete mixer with sand, gravel and bagged cement, and wheeling the heavy concrete in wheelbarrows to the forms. Then the flooring and framing of the walls; Reuben would patiently give instructions from his office desk, and the kids, under John's leadership, would wrestle the lumber into place. Next the roof; five children, ranging from nine to sixteen, were nailing their own hand-split cedar shingles on the high-pitched roof. The kids learned plumbing, electrical, plastering, finishing carpentry, painting and many etceteras. Seven

months from the start, five youngsters at the completed end of the project were much more confident and able than at the beginning.

Watching his plumber-catcher father at work behind the plate, John thought of the hundreds of times his dad led his family in a communion service after a meal, breaking bread and drinking home-made grape juice in remembrance of Christ. He was always moved by his dad's solemnity, moistened eyes, reverent voice. And then John considered how he drifted from his father, and yes, his father's Christ, lured by the excitement and glamor of church life. It had never occurred to John Douglas before this moment alone in the dugout - John's hero was no longer his father, his father having been toppled by Pastor Mac.

The pulpit had done that. Every Sunday for many years John sat under the sound of Mac's voice, an impressionable teen being impressed not only by the pastor's presentation, but the man himself. Every Sunday he inched closer to conversion to the pastor and the denomination he represented. Eighteen years of age, he, like his best friend Kyle, had already become a denominational person, biased and controlled. Not until this moment, a rare moment of clarity, a spiritual moment alone in the dugout, did he grasp the power of peer pressure that fashioned his young life, not only pressure from the young people to whom he had become knitted, but the adults who themselves were thoroughly attached to..... to *what?.....* certainly something different than his father was attached to.

Never before this game had he been in the dugout when his dad was behind home plate. From here he could see most clearly his dad's professionalism. Squatting rigid behind the plate, never leaning on one knee to make himself comfortable, his glove a still target for the pitcher. Never did he try to influence the ump by jerking his glove back to the middle of the plate after catching an outside or inside pitch. Never a complaint. Never body language after a bad call. After chasing a foul ball he *ran* back to his place behind the plate, no matter how late the inning or punishing the sun.

His professionalism influenced everyone on the team. It was hard to play casual when the back catcher, always in everyone's sight, was giving his all. Every game. Every inning. Never did he lose his composure or friendliness. Several times in a game he handed the opponent a fallen bat. And he was a real strength to his team. For years it was his habit to point with his glove to a fellow *Challenger* who made a good play while slapping his left shoulder with his other hand, his sign that said *Good Play!* or *Nice try!* Soon everyone adapted the habit, and encouraging each other through signals long ago became a team *thing*. The team was classier because of their back catcher.

And everyone respected his mastery of the game. He was fearless, never hesitating to throw a ball to first, and even second and third, if the runner was getting bold and straying from the bag, always trusting the baseman to catch his hard and accurate throw, though many times he did not. John knew, as did the other players, his dad's expertise behind the plate robbed the opponent of one or two runs per game, which won them several games throughout the year. John was sure Dad's professionalism influenced everyone, even the umps and opponent team, to give their best.

At this precious moment of time, John felt privileged as never before to be the son of the man inside the professional. *Dad and Mom are..... are.....* good *people! Yes, they are good!,* good being a word he could place on very few.Enveloped in the presence of the Holy Spirit, his heart pried wide open by the miracle healing, John wasn't the slightest concerned who might see his tears falling freely to the dugout floor. *They love Jesus with their lives. They brought me up to love God and serve Him wholeheartedly. Who else had the faith in Christ to heal my leg? And who can match Dad's character and integrity? Pastor Phil? Pastor Mac? Superintendent Johnston? Kyle?..... Katie?*

Katie. John thought about Katie, tried to see inside Katie, was well aware of Katie seated in the bleachers. *Was she thrilled with my healing or did she, like many, consider it a threat?* Whatever or whoever held Katie's loyalty, John concluded with deep sadness, it was not Jesus.

And where do I *stand? Am I another lukewarm evangelical content to capture the approval of others? Go with the flow?* "In the name of Jesus Christ, get to your feet," the words of John's father echoed in his mind. *Jesus, You healed me! I should be in Bryden Falls Hospital at this very moment with a serious injury! But You healed me!* Sitting alone, very alone, in the dugout, John Tanner recommitted his life, more fully and fervently than ever, to his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

"Good-bye, Pastor Phil," he whispered.

And then, "Good-bye, Pastor Mac."

And then after some hesitation, "Good-bye, Katie."

Eighth inning. Like Kyle before him, Phil Ferguson was waning under the constant jeers of the *Grizzlies* fans and the players from the *Grizzlies* dugout. Whenever the umpire called a strike Tree bitterly complained against favoritism, and the *Grizzlies* fans booed their resentment. Tree became frenzied and *demanded* his batters to hit the ball; if a batter swung and missed the *Grizzlies* dugout shouted obscenities at him, obscenities meant to prod the batter, and more, to unnerve the *Challengers* and the *Challengers* fans. It was turning real ugly. Phil, as coach, should have called time out after every outburst and complained to the umpire, but didn't, and Reuben hesitated to overstep him.

Jeni considered removing her children from the foul language but then had an inspiration. She began to hum *Amazing Grace,* just loud enough for the *MorLord* vocalists in front of her to hear. They picked up on it, and spontaneously the rest of the fans supported their worship band. Soon there was a beautiful humming sound emitting into the ball diamond, puzzling and then silencing the *Grizzlies.* During the remainder of the game they continued to hum various praise songs, the *Grizzlies* fans seemed to be mesmerized, and a calm prevailed.

By the time the *Challengers* got to bat they were down by two runs. Kyle was leadoff batter, and managed to hit one to the left field for a double, the cheers for his double much louder than Roo's home run. John noticed in the excitement Kyle's bat lying forgotten near the *Grizzlies* dugout. This

was his chance. No one runs faster than John Douglas Tanner, and everyone could see number sixteen's beautiful stride as he rushed full speed, as if in a race, to pick up the bat and return it to their dugout. "Isn't that the kid that was hurt? Looks okay to me!" And, "That's him, number sixteen!" And, "If he's okay, why isn't he playing?" And, "I'm sure that leg was broken! But look at him run!" An applause broke out from both bleachers. Pastor Phil was much less than pleased but did not, could not, say a word. Both Jeni and Katie had been fretful, needing assurance John really was okay. Katie turned to Mrs. Tanner gleefully, impulsively reached for her hand, and then, standing on her seat, gave Mrs. Tanner a warm hug, an extended hug that made a statement of support in front of everyone for the plumber's wife. At that moment Jeni knew, just knew, she was embracing her future daughter-in-law. And that did not sadden her.

John seldom sat next to Reuben in the dugout, wanting his own space in life, independence. But change had come with his recommitment to Christ. After placing the bat in front of the dugout he joined his dad at the end of the bench, and with a voice sufficient for everyone in the dugout to hear, said, "I love you, Dad!" *Did you hear that everyone? Did you hear, Pastor Phil? Kyle? I love my dad. I'm at his side now. Reuben Tanner's reproach is now John Douglas Tanner's reproach.*

Tree should not be pitching tonight; he pitched a full game the night before and his arm needed a rest. But Tree was willing to pay any price it took to win this game; so he replaced the pitcher on the mound. He could not let Kyle Maclin score from second base and trim their lead to one. Besides, after tonight the condition of his pitching arm mattered not a little.

Warming up with ten practice pitches, he carried on the argument he was having with himself.

His leg was broken! Don't try to tell me it wasn't broken!

You were standing at the dugout. You couldn't really tell if the leg was broken.

I'm not stupid! I can tell a broken leg when I see one!

Well, if it really was broken why isn't the kid in the hospital? You just saw him run to pick up the bat.

I don't know! All I know is the leg was broken! Some are calling it a miracle!

A miracle? That's a joke. You don't believe in miracles, remember?

Right! There was no miracle for Billy and Jesse and Pete and Greg!

Right. Now play ball.

The next batter sacrificed an out by bunting to get Kyle to third base. Tree managed to strike out the next two batters, but not before Kyle scored when the catcher missed one of Tree's pitches. Heading into the ninth, the *Grizzlies* lead was cut to one, the score *Grizzlies* ten, *Challengers* nine.

Ninth inning. Phil Ferguson was not pitching well tonight, he should not have been pitching at all, John Tanner should be at the mound. Tree could see Phil was weakening, and gave instructions to

his players to work for a walk instead of trying to get on base with a hit. It worked. Soon the bases were loaded, none out.

Reuben called time, walked to the pitcher's mound, and catcher and pitcher seemed to be having an in-depth dialog. Tree complained to the umpire about a delay-of-game, the umpire yelled, "Play ball!" and Phil yelled back, "Pitcher change!" *Who are they going to put in now?* Tree wondered. *They don't have a solid pitcher left except the Tanner kid and seems like he's benched. Looks like the game is ours.* And then he saw Reuben stripping off his gear and Phil putting it on himself. *What's this?* Tree asked himself. Over the years Tree had never seen Roo pitch, and if he had ever pitched against another team he would have heard.

In fact, Reuben Tanner never pitched in his life, always behind the plate. He couldn't throw a slider, a curve, or a drop ball if his life depended on it. But he could throw hard.

For more than twenty-five years, Reuben threw the ball more times in a game than any other player, including the pitcher. In his career he returned the ball to the pitcher perhaps a half a million times, strengthening his already brawny arm, his throw so strong and accurate few runners would try to steal a base on him. But he had never pitched before. But this was a desperate situation. But could he pull it off?

Reuben waived away his practice pitches, not wanting to give the opposition time to strategize. Spike was the first to face him. Reuben threw hard down the middle and Spike swung late. "Strike one!" Reuben threw even harder and Spike swung late again. "Strike two!" Reuben intentionally threw high, Spike could not check his swing and..... "Strike three! Batter's out!" The fans could no longer contain their enthusiasm, not the *positives* nor the *negatives*. "Roo! Roo! Roo!" they shouted. Phil called time out, ran to the dugout, put on his batting glove and a second borrowed glove over the first to lessen the sting to his hand, and during this time the pumped spectators did not cease their "Roo! Roo! Roo!"

The next batter was visibly nervous; he had never faced a pitcher this fast. He feebly connected on the second pitch, but fouled it high in the air, an easy catch for Phil. "Two out!" "Roo! Roo! Roo!" The next batter was Tree, a great pitcher but less than mediocre hitter. Three more very hard pitches and the top of the inning was over, no damage done.

But the *Grizzlies* were still one run up. Tree's arm was strong and he was confident he could keep the *Challengers* from scoring. *If only they would stop that humming! It's so..... relaxing!*

He managed to get two out, but not before there were runners on first and second, and none other than Reuben Tanner was coming to bat. "Roo! Roo! Roo!" the fans shouted – until it became obvious there was no way the pitcher was going to give the league's high .590 batting average a chance to hit. The "Roo! Roo! Roo!" ceased. Tree had decided to pitch every throw inside. If it hit Roo, too bad, Roo would be given a free trip to first, loading the bases, and Tree would strike out the next batter who he knew to be a weak hitter; he would throw his very hardest even if it completely wrecked his

arm. If Roo were foolish enough to swing at an inside pitch, he wouldn't get it out of the infield, an easy third out, game over.

The count was three balls, no strikes when Tree pitched his fourth inside pitch. An instant before his release Reuben stepped to the back edge of the batters box, the inside pitch no longer inside to Reuben, and he hit an arching, spinning ball over the second baseman's head and far short of the outfielder's glove – just like he had done numerous times in his career. Phil, the runner on first, ran the instant the ball was hit, not hesitating to see where the ball was heading. Spike, right fielder, charged the ball, knowing he could not prevent the tie run at second base from scoring, but desperate to stop Ferguson from scoring the winning run. When the ball hit the ground it spun crazily away from Spike, heading in the direction of the *Grizzlies* bleachers. Spike gave chase. The third base coach violently waved his right arm in a circular motion signaling Phil, not the fastest runner, to race for home plate. Spike had the ball in his hand when Phil was halfway home. With a perfect throw to the back catcher Spike had a good chance to beat Phil at home plate. The ball in the air, there was no humming, no cheering, no breathing.

tuesday, june 5th, 2007, 9:05 p.m.

The welfare of the *Center* was on the line and this was a most crucial meeting, yet Mac had an ear attentive to the barely audible sounds drifting from the baseball field through the boardroom window left ajar. Yes, he was a pastor with a pastor's heart, but he was also a baseball player. His watch told him the game was a lengthy one, the occasional outbursts of loud cheering suggested the game was close. He thought he heard humming of praise songs but dismissed that as imaginary. But the chanting of "Roo!" near the end of the game, so familiar to him, was unmistakable. Reuben must be up to bat, he wrongfully concluded, never dreaming Reuben would be pitching. When the chanting for Roo picked up a short time later, he was confused, knowing that Reuben could not be at bat again so soon. But one thing was conclusive, the raucous shouting and cheering at 9:27 p.m. that he knew came from his people assured him the *Challengers* had won! They had beaten the *Grizzlies* for the first time ever! One more win and they would be in the playoffs!

A short time later, Phil entered the boardroom in his socks and dusty uniform, his cleats left at the door.

Phil Ferguson: Brothers.

Sheldon Waters: We could stand to hear some good news.

Phil Ferguson: We beat the *Grizzlies.* It was quite a game.

Everyone: Great! Wonderful! That's certainly good news!

Sheldon Waters: Would you like to give a report?

Phil Ferguson: Yes. As I said, it was quite a game, and I'm referring to more than just the game itself.

Sheldon Waters: We're all ears.

Phil Ferguson: The atmosphere was unmistakably different, both in the dugout and in the stands. Of course, this is because of Tanner's speech which, by the way, I have listened to on my cassette player. The players were divided and I'm sure the fans also. There was a tension, seemingly tangible.

Donald Williamson: This simply confirms what we already know. I tell you, we must put a stop to this!

Sheldon Waters: Carry on, Pastor Phil.

Phil Ferguson: In the fifth inning John Tanner appeared to be seriously injured.

Terry Maclin: Is he okay?

Phil Ferguson: He is now. It appeared like he broke his leg.

Terry Maclin: I didn't hear an ambulance.

Phil Ferguson: Reuben Tanner said to his son, "In the name of Jesus Christ, get to your feet." Well, the fact is, John got to his feet and there was every indication he was healed.

David Tomas: You mean, miraculously healed?

Donald Williamson: Wait a minute, Tomas! Pastor Phil said he *appeared* to be injured. Maybe this was something the Tanners cooked up to impress the church, you know, to gain credibility.

David Tomas: In all due respect, sir, that is insane!

Terry Maclin: Donald, that is simply not possible. I know them both well. They are far above such treachery.

Donald Williamson: I stand corrected, Pastor. Nonetheless, Pastor Phil seems uncertain, and I think we should let the matter drop. This can only make a messy situation messier.

Nelson Chesney: Pastor Phil, was John Tanner's leg broken or not?

Phil Ferguson: It was broken.

Donald Williamson: Oh, my Lord!

Nelson Chesney: Pastor Phil, please tell us plainly. Is John Tanner's leg broken at this moment?

Phil Ferguson: It is not.

Nelson Chesney: It seems I am happy and sad at the same time. I suppose this made the people favorable toward Tanner?

Phil Ferguson: No, it didn't seem to. The people are very loyal to Pastor Mac. I think they felt that showing enthusiasm to Tanner would be a disloyalty to him. That's my assessment.

Terry Maclin: Pastor Phil, I did not hear the people chanting “Roo!” until the end of the game. Could you explain?

Phil Ferguson: Nobody chanted when Tanner came to bat, as they usually do, and I suppose that's because of loyalty to you. My arm was tiring at the top of the ninth inning and I loaded the bases with walks, none out. It was very precarious as there was no one to replace me. I had taken John out of the game in case he was not completely healed. And I must say, I may have had a less noble motive. Tanner suggested we trade spots, and at first I rejected the idea but remembered your instruction to heed any suggestion Tanner might have. Besides, there didn’t seem to be an alternative.

Terry Maclin: Are you saying Reuben Tanner pitched? He has never pitched!

Phil Ferguson: Three up, three down. I don’t think he threw more than seven or eight pitches. Hard, hard pitches. It was during his pitching the people began to chant, “Roo! Roo! Roo!” like they couldn’t contain themselves anymore.

Terry Maclin: I heard the chanting twice.

Phil Ferguson: There were two of us on base, the bottom of the ninth, two out, we’re down by one run when Tanner came to bat. It was a real tense moment and the people began chanting “Roo!” again. He hit the ball to the right field, and I managed to make it home from first base. It was a real close call, but the ump called me safe.

Donald Williamson: So now Tanner is the hero of *Bryden Falls Community Christian Center!* Tanner the miracle-worker! Tanner the great baseball player! A very bad dream is turning into a nightmare!

David Tomas: Pastor Phil, you said a less noble motive. Did you think it best to get John Tanner out of peoples' view?

Phil Ferguson: Yes. In hindsight, I was wrong. That almost cost us the game.

Sheldon Waters: Pastor Phil, I for one can understand. Most of us have no experience in dealing with a church split. Shaun, we haven’t heard from you in a while.

Shaun Edwards: Our people are privileged to witness a rare miracle healing and we are threatened. Something is wrong with this picture! I have a suggestion. Let us ask Pastor Mac to speak to Reuben frankly and openly, explaining the dire quandary the church is in. If Tanner is a reasonable man he will forfeit his permission to give the second part of his message.

Some: Amen! Sounds logical!

Donald Williamson: That’s a twist! Somehow *we* have become the beggars!

Sheldon Waters: David, you know Tanner. Is he a reasonable man?

David Tomas: Reuben is a reasonable man.

Sheldon Waters: Pastor Mac, are you in agreement?

Terry Maclin: I have already made an appointment with Reuben for tomorrow afternoon. I will fully explain the situation to him, and if he volunteers to back off I certainly won't argue.

Sheldon Waters: Is everyone in agreement?

Everyone: I agree.

Sheldon Waters: Pastor, is it true you are taking your vacation early?

Terry Maclin: Yes, I am actually on vacation right now. Also, Vivian will be away from her desk. Pastor Phil will be shouldering normal church responsibilities. I will be concentrating on the Tanner issue. I need time to pray, to hear from God.

Sheldon Waters: It doesn't sound like much of a vacation.

Terry Maclin: I am not feeling sorry for myself. I feel responsible for the predicament we are in. I will do what it takes to get us out of it.

Sheldon Waters: We are all responsible, Pastor.

Everyone: Amen! That's right.

Sheldon Waters: We want you to know we are all behind you.

Everyone except one: Amen!

wednesday, june 6th, 2007, 9:15 a.m.

Composed. That's the word Mac was searching for to describe his wife, now busy putting the final touches to the breakfast meal. As he sat at the table sipping his coffee and watching Vivian moving in different directions, stirring, heating, wiping, setting, the word came to him again: *Composed. My wife is a composed person.* And then, *Hmmm, Is it a good thing to have a composed wife?* He backtracked to the day he met Vivian in Bible school, not much older than their Katie. *She certainly was not excessively composed then,* he recalled.

Composure started to replace real and frivolous and passionate about fifteen years ago, it seemed to Mac. Invasion came slowly, composure limited to church, but once it got a grip it began to fan out, conquering other areas of life, marriage, motherhood, relationships with family. Composure is learned, Mac realized. *But from whom?* After some consideration he realized it was *he* who was her silent mentor. And others, surely. But mostly, he had to admit, it was his influence.

When Mac was at the pulpit he was composed; it was something he chose and practiced to be; it was expected. When communicating to church adherents, over the phone or in person, he was

composed. It was only natural his young wife, only a few feet away in the front row of seats or standing proudly by his side, would emulate her husband. To have a non-composed wife assisting a composed husband just wouldn't do.

It was difficult for Mac to consider composure without taking into account Superintendent Johnston. Now there was a composed man, more so than the most poised pastor at the convention. He had watched the man grow in composure over the years as his influence grew from pastor to district elder to assistant superintendent to the top job. He was expected to be more composed than everyone under him, and he managed quite well.

Mac had to admit both he and Vivian enjoyed being composed. It set them above. People responded to them cautiously. Composure was the wall that gave them distance from the numbers. The wealthy and dignitaries could empathize. But while Mac threw off his composure when he got home, Vivian remained cloaked. He liked a composed assistant but not a composed wife. A poised wife is not a close wife, not a fun wife. *Oh, the price we have both paid for significance.*

And the twins, he thought woefully. Already Kyle was learning composure, something to be put on like deodorant and hair spray and a clean shirt. One day a poised young lady, there would be plenty at *Norwestern Seminary,* would be attracted to his composure, and they would together have a stable and orderly and composed life.

And my Katie? he wondered. She was determined to marry a pastor; he considered the many pastors he knew, and yes, with few exceptions, they were quite composed.

And then he looked into himself. *Do I still want to be composed? Is it too late for* de-*composure? Would I be willing to pay the price? Would my family follow? Is it too late for them? Is there similarity between composure and fakery? Were the Pharisees composed? How about the apostles?*

"Did you have a good sleep?" Vivian interrupted her husband's meandering thoughts, setting a plate of sausages and eggs and toast in front of him.

"No. But thanks for asking. Ketchup, please. Are the kids at school? I haven't seen them much lately."

"They are saying the same thing about you. It's that time of the year, final exams."

"Are they doing okay?"

"As far as examines go, they are doing fine."

"Other problems?"

"Yes. The division that has split the church has split the twins." Vivian's indignation was rising again.

"No!" And again, "No! They were so close!"

"It started when Kyle followed me out the church door and Katie stayed behind. Kyle has not spoken

to her since. He is quite disturbed with her. He feels she is being disloyal to you and to me."

"And what do you think?"

"I have to agree. We always taught her family comes first."

"I will have to have a talk with her."

"She is having a busy week, finals, band practice, Saturday's performance."

"Is she taking appointments?"

"She needs her father. She's being pulled two different directions. Did you know she resigned her position as lead vocalist to Todd Anderson?"

"But why?"

"Blame the plumber."

"The plumber! The plumber is dividing the congregation, the board of elders, the baseball team and now my family. I will be glad when this passes."

"Will it ever pass? Or will the rippling effect go on and on?"

"I can't answer that. My place is to be sensitive to the Lord. He is the only One who can get us out of this. You did the sausages and eggs perfectly..... again. May I never take you for granted."

"This came in the mail, special delivery. Were you expecting something?" Vivian queried as she handed Mac the blue, white and red envelope.

"Wow! Sort of. It's from head office."

"I know. Aren't you going to open it?"

"How about you opening it? Read it out loud. I think you might find it interesting."

Soon Vivian began reading the short letter: "Dear Brother and Pastor Terry Maclin: Please prayerfully consider letting your name stand for assistant superintendent of the District of ..... Terry! Does this mean what I think it means?" This was a rare occasion when Vivian lost her composure, and Mac wished a quick wish it would never return. "They want you as assistant superintendent? Did you know about this? Are you as surprised as I am? Does this mean we will be moving? What about your pastorate here at the *Center?"*

"Hold it! Slow down! I had an inkling I would be given an invitation for advancement," he replied, taking the letter from her. "It says the first four-year term will begin in September of this year should my name be ratified by the District Council. I'm certain that is just a formality. I'm sure I will be able to hold my position as senior pastor if I choose to, though I will be traveling intermittently throughout the States and Canada. The kids will be away at school so you can accompany me on some of the

trips. I think you will find it enjoyable. Also, we have the option of relocating, maybe back home."

"But the twins. This is the only home they know."

"This will be a family decision. They might want to move closer to their grandparents and other relatives."

"Will our traveling expenses be covered?"

"Certainly. And we can expect a major hike in pay."

"Whose signature is on the letter?"

"None other than Superintendent Martin Johnston."

"I remember when he was assistant. Maybe one day you will fill his position. You must be honored."

"It is an honor. I think my oration at the convention impressed everyone there. Our church is the talk of the denomination. I think they like the way we have reached out into our community. And they were really impressed with our baseball team. I had a strong hunch I would be given a promotion. It is something I have hoped for a long time, to be influential on a broader scale. It's time to move up the ladder."

"Let's not mention it to the twins until their exams are over."

Mac considered composure again. He knew he must grow. *Mac* would have to go; he would be Assistant Superintendent Terry Maclin. Vivian would not have to grow, he reasoned; she already matched the superintendent's wife. *Do I really want this?*

wednesday, june 6th, 2007, 9:45 a.m.

Superintendent Martin Johnston was disturbed by the secretary's voice on the telephone intercom: "Sorry to bother you, sir. I know you generally don't accept incoming calls before ten, but the gentleman stressed that it was very important. He said his name is Donald Williamson of Bryden Falls, Canada. Do you wish to accept his call?"

"Donald Williamson? Oh, yes!..... Hello, Donald!"

"Of course I remember you! The last time I saw you was at my father's funeral about five years ago. You were one of his closest friends."

"Yes, I miss him too. As I speak, I am looking at your picture next to Dad's on my office wall."

"Surprised? Your picture has been there with several other pioneers for many years. May we never forget the sacrifice your generation has made to the denomination."

"We are the ones who are honored. How is the weather in Bryden Falls? It has been a while since I was there."

"A problem at the *Center?* Please tell me about it."

"Really."

"Really."

"I am very surprised, sir, and a bit disturbed. Terry Maclin gave such a glowing report on *Bryden Falls Community Christian Center* just a few days ago. Frankly, sir, if I were not hearing it from you personally, I would not give this any credence whatsoever."

"So this all happened *since* the conference?"

"Tell me, Donald, is this Tanner a licensed minister from another denomination?"

"He's a plumber? A layman? It is not our policy to invite laymen to preach."

"Let me see if I got this straight. You are saying a plumber asked permission to speak to the congregation, and Terry obliged?"

"Oh I see, Terry denied him permission and this Tanner appealed to the board. He seems like a very determined fellow. And what was the decision of the board of elders?"

"I'm disappointed the board could not come to a consensus."

"Oh my! How was the elder's resignation explained to the congregation?"

"I see. It seems this plumber split the board of elders and Terry thought it would be less divisive to the assembly to let the plumber speak than to deny him. Now tell me again, sir, what shape is the *Center* in at this moment?"

"Really."

"Really. In hindsight, does Terry now consider his judgment to be, shall we say, less than wise?"

"If he frankly admits to an error of judgment I don't see a reason for me to interfere. I have confidence Terry will work it out. But I certainly appreciate you alerting me."

"Say that again!"

"In all due respect, sir, I can't imagine Terry doing that. He is responsible to protect the congregation."

"No, no, no! I couldn't let that happen. The plumber will not speak to the congregation again! I will get in touch with Terry this morning. I'm sure this can be worked out."

"Well, it sounds like a peculiar time to be on vacation."

"Oh, I see."

"Don't be concerned about that, Donald; I will be discreet."

CHAPTER EIGHT

wednesday, june 6th, 2007, 10:00 a.m.

Beer in hand, Tree drooped his depressed body over an old depressed lawn chair on his front porch, and stared angrily into the bright June morning, recounting the last play of the last game of his career.

It wasn't often someone outfoxed Tree, but he was certainly outfoxed by Reuben Tanner. When Roo stepped back in the batters box Tree wanted to protest to the umpire that he stepped *outside* the box and should be called out. Not that he *saw* Roo step out, but that mattered little; he *could have* and that was reason enough to squawk. But everybody's attention was on the ball floating over the second baseman's head. Spike should have anticipated the spin on the ball that bounced crazily away from him, Tree determined. The big man looked silly, slipping and sliding, chasing the white ball spinning across the sideline but still in play. Tree was sure a good throw from Spike to home could beat Phil Ferguson running to home plate. The throw wasn't perfect, but not bad. The back catcher caught the ball just above his head and immediately swept his glove inches in front of home plate as Ferguson was sliding in, feet first. Was he out or safe mattered little to the *Grizzlies* fans, or to Tree who was where he shouldn't be, only a few feet from the plate, or the other *Grizzlies* players, all where they shouldn't be, outside their dugout; in unison they all screamed "Out!" to influence the plate ump. The umpire had his thumb protruding from his fist ready to jerk it upwards, a signal the runner was out. But then he hesitated, and instead waved his arms across each other to signal the runner was safe, and all the noisy protesting and tantrums of the *Grizzlies* did not convince him to reverse his call. The *Grizzlies* lost the game and the championship by one run and a fraction of a second. And Tree was mad at God. Again.

God was chuckling. No, He was having a serious belly laugh, thoroughly enjoying Tree's letdown, or so Tree convinced himself. God knew how much Tree wanted to take the trophy to his grave with him, but He denied him that small victory. Less than a half a second! Why couldn't God have given him a tiny instant of time? Losing first place in the league was a confirmation of just how worthless he was. *Okay, that's settled,* Tree spoke to himself. *I am an entirely useless person. What's the difference? Soon it will be all over. Four more days.*

And then he thought of the plumber who took the game from him. It was Roo who hit a grand slam home run. It was Roo who struck out three batters in a row, himself included, at the top of the ninth. It was Roo who hit in the winning run. But it was hard to hate a guy, try as he did, who had so much grit, even though he was so..... yucky pleasant.

"In the name of Jesus Christ, get to your feet." Those words wouldn't go away like other words do. *I heard Tanner say it twice, and his kid obeys him, like, "Come for supper," and the kid runs to the supper*

table. It just doesn't make sense. The leg was broken, and then it's not broken. Kind of spooky. The kid's on the ground and he's hurting big time, and then the kid's standing. No more pain. Go figure. That Tanner's an unusual dude. Wish I knew what made him tick.

And then, *I wonder how Mac's handling his church problems. This win ought to cheer him up. And the miracle, or whatever it was, should be the equivalent of a cool half-dozen beer on a hot June day.*

wednesday, june 6th, 2007, 10:30 a.m.

Vivian was getting groceries so it was up to Mac to answer the phone before the recorder cut in; it could be important.

"Pastor Maclin speaking."

"Well hello, Superintendent Johnston! This is a surprise!"

"I'm doing fine, sir," Mac lied. "And yourself?"

"Oh?"

"Oh?"

"Well, actually, the person who contacted you was speaking the truth. We are going through a time of trouble. I want you to know, however, that the trouble, mostly, arose recently, since the convention. I was not being deceptive when I spoke of the *Center."*

"Thank you for saying that, sir. I must say, I needed that encouragement. I haven't gone through anything like this before."

"Yes, sir. I realize my mistake, and I take full responsibility."

"Yes, that is correct. I gave my word that Tanner could speak two successive Sundays. I feel I must keep my word."

"But, sir, I can't do that. As I said, I gave my word."

"I certainly share your concern, sir. I will be speaking to Tanner in a few hours. I intend to fully explain the entire matter, and hopefully he will gracefully rescind."

"Yes, sir, I received it in this morning's mail. I was honored. Thank you for considering me. I know there are many qualified men you could choose for this position."

"Oh?"

"I understand, sir."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"Yes, I will keep you informed."

"Good-bye, sir."

wednesday, june 6th, 2007, 1:50 p.m.

Mac had been in many evangelical churches over the years, but never had he seen a pulpit so noble as his own, tastefully fashioned, undoubtedly for the purpose of dignifying the word preached. It was just a few days ago he was telling a number of his contemporaries the danger of the pulpit if its power was not properly harnessed. How stupid he had been, he thought, to allow an untrained layman access to this pulpit; how different life would be if he simply refused.

The miserable, cloudy day was a fulfillment of predicted rainy weather to befall Bryden Falls for the next few days, and the atmosphere in the sanctuary was equally gloomy. It was a wounded and disappointment Mac, clad in sweats and T-shirt, two baseball gloves and a ball at his side, who was leaning on his pulpit trying to determine who betrayed him. He knew he ought not try to guess who contacted Superintendent Johnston - his guess could never be more than a speculation, and suspicion could fall on an innocent - but restraint was difficult. And perhaps *betrayal* was an unfair word. Did his people not have reason to distrust his judgment?

It didn't seem feasible someone from the congregation would contact the district office; denominational headquarters was a world unfamiliar to most. Perhaps someone from the board where there was some awareness of ecclesiastical complexities. *But who? I better stop there!*

In a few minutes he would be meeting with Reuben Tanner. Funny, he thought, how his future somehow got placed in the hands of a plumber/back catcher. If Roo did not rescind Mac could say good-bye to the assistant superintendent posting; Martin Johnston was subtle, but his ultimatum clear. It took all Mac's willpower to put uprightness before expedience, to keep the word he regretted giving. He wanted the new posting. No, he *deserved* the posting - had he not been exceptionally diligent all these years? - and he ached for advancement. And how could he disappoint Vivian again? He was sorely tested.

A few minutes before two he heard a vehicle in the empty parking lot and knew the plumber had arrived. Baseball stuff in hand, he headed out the door.

"Thought you could help me loosen my arm for Friday's game," Mac said as he handed a glove to Roo, thinking it would help him keep his anger, as well as a few other emotions, in check if he activated his body.

Roo liked that. "Certainly, Mac. Good idea! Do you want to walk to the diamond?" But at that moment the clouds decided to unload, and both men scurried inside the sanctuary.

Phil Ferguson was drawn to the sanctuary by the *Smack!* sound of ball-on-glove, and was amazed to see the senior pastor and the enemy-layman casually throwing the ball down the center aisle of the sanctuary. Concluding some things are best unseen, he returned to his office and to church affairs.

Behind Roo was expensive glass in the foyer swinging doors, as well as breakables in the back of the church. Behind Mac was the lighted pulpit both men put in place a number of years ago. Mac had an accurate pitch, Roo was an excellent catcher, and as long as no one saw them likely no harm would be done.

After some baseball chatter, Mac got down to business. "I guess you're aware of the dilemma the church is in?" He pitched a ball down the center of the red-carpeted aisle, aiming at an imaginary home plate. Roo answered with an affirmative nod, and returned the ball.

"As you know, I took your appeal to the board. They were surprised someone would appeal my judgment."

Smack!

"They had never encountered an appeal before. There was a lengthy discussion, but for the first time they could not come to a consensus. As you know, Tony Borric resigned over the matter."

Smack!

"It was a blow to the board and to the congregation." Mac tried to discern a response from Roo, but he seemed unaffected.

"They returned the matter into my hands, assuring me they would back me up whatever I decided. Frankly, the only reason I gave you permission to speak to the congregation was because I thought less damage would be done than denying you."

Smack!

"You are influential at the *Center,* and I thought you might take advantage of your influence and try to get to the people another way. This would be cause for a major confrontation whereby everyone would be hurt."

Reuben was silent, methodically returning Mac's pitches. *This guy just isn't hearing me!* Mac was getting agitated.

"It's ironic I was giving a talk at the conference at the same time you were speaking to my congregation. The title of my message was *Pulpit Power.* I spoke how dangerous a pulpit can be, both to the speaker and to the listeners." No response.

Smack!

"When I got home I found our congregation split. I was amazed at just how quickly a church split can happen, and how devastating it can be. Dozens of people phoned, most were anxious and upset."

Smack!

"I was so shocked I couldn't respond to their anxieties. I felt like I had the wind knocked out of me."

The back catcher had nothing to say, so Mac asked him, "Ever get the wind knocked out of you, Roo?"

Finally, a response, "A couple of times. It's incredibly painful."

Smack!

Well, he's alive! Mac thought. "Since your request to address the congregation the board is split, the congregation divided, the baseball team is not the same, and my own family is at odds with each other. The influence the *Center* has had on the community is in jeopardy. We risk losing our witness."

The *Smack!* of the ball hitting Roo's glove got increasingly louder with intensified pitches fueled by Mac's swelling frustration at Roo's seeming passiveness. "At an emergency meeting the board decided to reverse my decision to allow you to speak this Sunday, such is their concern for the welfare of the congregation."

Smack!!

"However, I told them I am obligated to keep my word, and they, or at least some, concluded they were likewise obligated to keep their word to me." Still no reply. Mac felt he was degrading himself, begging for mercy.

Smack!!

Doesn't this guy have a heart? "I got a letter this morning from the district office offering me the position of assistant superintendent. I have been secretly hoping for this for years. Vivian was very excited."

Smack!!!

Now the pitches were very hard; still Reuben handled them with ease. "This was followed by a phone call from the superintendent. Someone contacted him, and he phoned me to communicate the fact the offer will be canceled if I allow you to speak on Sunday."

Smack!!!

"No, he wasn't that blunt, but that was his implication. I suppose it would be safe to say such an opportunity will not come again for many years."

Smack!!!

And then Mac had no more to say. It was Roo's turn to speak, but he didn't. Mac went into full pitcher's wind-up. *Smack!!!..... Smack!!!..... Smack!!!* Mac was losing control, both of his emotions and his pitches. A hard pitch went wild, threatening the sound equipment in the audio booth, and Roo barely managed to block it. Mac wound up to pitch again, harder this time, but instead dropped his glove and ball to the floor. The two men stared at each other in silence. Mac had his answer; Roo

would not rescind.

Shoulders drooped, Mac walked to the pulpit, his back to the plumber. The words were inside him, but refused to come out. *No! I will not let this happen! I will not allow you to speak to my people again! Enough damage has been done! I gave you the opportunity to back off gracefully, but you refused! Now I must reverse my decision! You give me no choice!*

Instead he reached for a book he had placed in the pulpit, Martin Johnston's *Building A Church On Wisdom's Foundation.* "Reuben, I want you to read this book. It will help you to see from another vantage, perhaps one you have never considered before. Will you do that?"

"Of course, Mac"

"And can you do that in the next three days? I know that's asking a lot, but I want you to read it before Sunday." *Perhaps* this *will persuade him!*

"I will read it within the next three days."

"Thank you. Well, I guess our meeting is over."

"Could you walk me to my van? I have something for *you.* I think it stopped raining."

"Certainly."

At *Reuben's Plumbing* van, Roo handed Mac a book entitled *The Way It Is,* authored by Larry Jones. Roo borrowed Mac's words, "Mac, I want you to read this book. It will help you to see from another vantage, perhaps one you have never considered before. Will you do that?" Mac looked for mockery in the plumber's face but, worse, could only find sincerity.

Mac felt trapped. How could he refuse a request from Roo who used his same words to make the same appeal? How could he say no when Roo just said yes? *Doesn't this guy get it?* I *am the pastor!* He *is the layman! I am the minister, the leader. He is my ministry. It's my place to minister to him, not him to me!*

Mac, defeated, used Roo's response, "Of course, Roo."

"See you Friday evening at the game," was Mac's way of saying good-bye. And then, "Was John's leg *really* broken?"

"It was broken," said the man of few words. And *Reuben's Plumbing* van made a large circle and exited the parking lot.

thursday, june 7th, 2007, 6:15 a.m.

"Sally, I hope we don't lose contact with each other after you and the children move east."

"Yes, that's right. And it won't cost any more as long as we continue to phone early in the morning.

Not that that's an issue. Your friendship is what counts."

"Oh, don't thank me. I enjoy our morning chats. Tell me, Sally, are you nervous driving a long distance by yourself? I talked it over with Reuben, and I could make the drive with you and fly back."

"Are you sure? I would be happy to do it."

"Well okay then. I'll be praying for you. I assume you have a dependable car?"

"That was good of Trevor to give you the minivan."

"I know, Sally. It's unusual for a divorced couple to maintain their love for one another. I feel so bad for your entire family."

"Are you saying you are afraid for Trevor?"

"But the kids will still maintain contact with their dad. They can write or phone or email."

"Oh."

"So this is a final good-bye? No birthday cards, no Christmas gifts, no summer visits? Sally, are you sure that's the way to go?"

"I see."

"I can understand that. It sounds so final."

"Just three more days. Did you manage to locate a place to live?"

"I hope you don't have to spend too much time in a motel. They can be expensive this time of the year. It's too bad you don't know anyone at the other end."

"Yes, I know you want a fresh start, Sally."

"Yes, I am sure you will find work soon. And hopefully you will find a good school for the kids."

"Yes, Reuben and I hurt for you and your family, but we will never stop praying. Never."

"Of course that includes Trevor. Where are you and the kids meeting Trevor Sunday morning?"

thursday, june 7th, 2007, 7:15 a.m.

Katie was careful not to wake her parents. They were on vacation, such as it was, let them sleep. As she opened her bedroom door she noticed the note in the hallway.

Miss Katie Maclin:

The honor of your presence is requested by Pastor Terry Maclin this evening of the seventh day of June in the year two thousand and seven for a delightful dining experience at Mario's Pizza *immediately following band practice.*

R.S.V.P. before eight a.m. of the same date.

P.S. Please wear pigtails.

Yes, Daddy, she wrote, *I will be in pigtails.* And she slipped the note under the bedroom door before quietly leaving for school where another final exam awaited her.

thursday, june 7th, 2007, 7:30 a.m.

Reuben was in his office keeping his word. He thought how nice it must be to be able to write a book, to convey one's convictions in a comprehensible manner, to tear down opposing arguments, to neatly package one's passions and certainties between two glossy covers. *Building A Church On Wisdom's Foundation* was such a book. Little wonder there were over a hundred thousand in print.

Mac was right. The book exposed Reuben to a church perspective he never before considered. The simple plumber was impressed, overwhelmed, by the flow of logic and reason that made it very plain to him his Sunday morning speech was out of order.

It was no longer a heavy rope that tethered Reuben to his conviction that many at the *Center* must be converted, again, to the Lord Jesus Christ; the commotion in the church caused by his sermon weakened the rope to a string no longer able to sustain much tension. He was a plumber, a good plumber, but a simple and naive plumber, sheltered from church complications. He felt he had a message for the people of *Bryden Falls Community Christian Center;* perhaps - apparently? - he was wrong. He could not be prepared for the devastation his word of warning had caused. *One time* he preached to a sizeable audience, *once only,* and the church he helped build and cherished was on the brink of permanent schism. The private plumber was now the public enemy. How close he was to caving. A few more *Smacks!* from Mac's appeal to relinquish the pulpit would have ended the contest; Mac would have had his pulpit back, and Reuben would have returned to his world of toilets and tubs and sinks, eventually forgiven.

Building A Church On Wisdom's Foundation was putting tension on the string still binding him to earlier convictions, a tension increased with every turn of the page.

Page 27: *A community of Christians, though knitted together by God Himself, is fragile and words spoken from the pulpit must be delicate and communicated with the same care a mother communicates her affections to her young child. Truth alone is not restorative; truth must be robed in gentleness. Truth must not be delivered by the blacksmith's hammer, but planted by the gardener's tender hands.*

Page 36: *Ministers of congregations are a redeemed but fallen people on a journey of restoration with an awkward burden of leading others along the same road. We are the spiritually near-sighted conveying understanding we are not sure we have, the emotionally maimed doctoring the emotionally maimed, the confused giving direction, the guilty judge removing the speck from another's eye. To lose this perspective, to consider oneself to be more than ordinary, to place one's confidence in self-attained*

insights, is indulging in fantasy. And nothing is more destructive to an assemblage than a deluded minister ministering fanciful convictions.

Security is building upon the wisdom of those who have walked our walk before us, those who have learned by costly mistakes, the lineage of humbled ministers of God's truths who themselves have turned to the wisdom of their forefathers. While there is prideful satisfaction in being the "loose cannon," there is also accompanying havoc. When dependence upon others is forsaken for independent self-reliance, the fall of many is soon forthcoming.

A minister must school himself in the understandings accumulated by others, an education of which Bible school is but a part. He must learn the art of cooperation, attire himself with the bearing of a submissive servant, earn the endorsement of his peers, for only the humble can learn spiritual values and effectively convey those values to others.

Reuben closed the book to get a respite from the painful, reproving words, and hid his face in his hands. *What have I done? Am I the deluded minister ministering fanciful insights? Have I been the loose canon creating havoc? I certainly did not earn the endorsement of my peers. How did I get myself into this mess?*

Page 51: *Few would argue love is the essence of Christian community life. In a band of diverse persons love is usually best expressed through tolerance. Acceptance of others comes easier after self-examination, after the discovery of the plank in one's own eye, after probing one's memory for past failures. How self-gratifying to be the one bringing correction, to be the sign pointing the way, the voice crying in the wilderness of conflicting opinions. How insignificant to be the hearer only, to be the student instead of the teacher. How we each long to express our view, to have an audience, to be recognized.*

If each in the community were given equal opportunity to express, the community would soon be a shambles of conflicting thoughts and opinions. While unity is the fruit of time and patience, division comes in a day. A divided people may meet regularly, but the fruit of their togetherness is stunted. "Together we stand; divided we fall" is a truism that must be applied to a congregation ambitious for a substantial harvest.

It became apparent to Reuben why Mac refused to give him the pulpit at his first request. He read again, *If each in the community were given equal opportunity to express, the community would soon be in a shambles of conflicting thoughts and opinions.* He could not come up with one reason why he should be the lone layman privileged to express his opinions before the others. He was just a plumber; how could he expect to match the competence and understanding of schooled reverends? *What have I done?* he asked himself again.

thursday, june 7th, 2007, 8:35 a.m.

Mac was still in bed, being deliberately lazy this rainy Thursday morning, keeping his word. *So many people writing books nowadays,* Mac critically mused as he perused the cover of *The Way It Is.* He

started the book last night and had been reading since six this morning, wanting to get the pesky chore done and behind him. Vivian served breakfast in bed; after all, they were on vacation. He had thought of writing his own book, he was already experienced and successful at writing articles for the denomination's monthly, maybe some day when demands on his time ease up. Besides, the book inside him, he sensed, was still not completed.

Mac was angry. *Here I am on vacation and I am forced - forced! - to read a book I don't want to read, by a writer who has no qualifications whatsoever! Every time I have dealings with that plumber I come out the loser - this book is at least a quarter thicker than the one I gave Tanner!*

Mac's rope, the one tying him to his convictions - really the adopted convictions of others - and to his denomination, was still strong, though not so strong as before the day the plumber said, "I believe I have a message for the congregation."

The cord had been weakened by innocent questions at the elders' meetings to determine the validity of the way the *Center* operated. Mac was humbled, not having a defense though his role as pastor was being questioned. He grimaced at the remembrance of his own words to the board, "I am a licensed and ordained minister of our denomination, and as such have agreed to abide by denominational bylaws and policies …… I am committed to head office and the standard they have set." It was a veiled threat, "We stick to the way it has always been or I'm out of here!" Although it worked - the tone and the direction of the board changed soon thereafter - Mac felt like a spiritual wimp. He did not, could not, declare his own persuasions in the matter because he didn't have any, so he opted to take refuge in the convenient assumption that others were wiser than he.

Tony Borric's closing of the Bible made a very sharp statement. Before, Mac and the board could hide behind confusion, but now the fuzziness was removed, now it was painfully obvious they had been walking, and chose to continue to walk, in a direction that did not have the endorsement of the Bible.

But the weakened cord still had strength. Tanner's tape might have weakened it further had he listened with his heart. He had to admit he never gave it fair attention. *I won't do that again.* Mac was accustomed to keeping his word. *I will read, not skim over, this book. And then I will dismiss it altogether!* was his 6:00 a.m. resolution.

But Mac was having his world toppled. The rope was shrinking to a string. *The Way It Is* challenged perceptions Mac had always deemed sacred, comparing those perceptions to New Testament writings.

Mac's problem was his honesty - not to suggest his heart was *entirely* honest, who's is? But the honest part of his heart outweighed the *dis*honest part. Yet, like most, he was adept at slipping into denial when confronted with unwanted reality, and would have found solace there this morning except for the second problem. There was no running away; he had given Roo his word as Roo had given him his. His honesty compelled him to read *The Way It Is,* every sentence, every argument,

every perspective.

The writer was like a prosecuting attorney pointing a condemning finger at the evangelical belief system, presenting evidence that many practices, though established and cherished and honored, were detrimental to the circulation of the gospel of Christ and the health of His church, causing most evangelical adherents to adopt a pygmy perspective of their potential and responsibility. And the author was also the defense lawyer, defending the truths of New Testament writings, appealing to the reader to build on the sure foundation of Christ's words, and warning of the folly of building on the sands of traditionalism.

Titles, salaried professionals, singular spokesmen, denominationalism, tithing - all these customs were brought under the scrutiny of the Word and, in the opinion of the author, were found wanting. Most upsetting to Mac was the writer's assault on what he called a "two-tiered system," the dividing of the church into the "ministerial and the laity," the "special and the not-so-special." Again and again, and again and again, the author pointed to Jesus Christ as the one and only pastor-shepherd of the sheep, claiming it was an insult to the "good shepherd" who "gives His life for the sheep" to call and consider a mere mortal his pastor. The writer made what Mac considered to be radical statements regarding evangelical churches, suggesting that Jesus Christ had slipped, to a large degree, from the consciousness of the people. Jesus was no longer lord, secondary to men who propagated a substitute set of traditions. But was it true? And then Mac thought of the closed Bible sitting in the middle of the boardroom table.

Mac's body weakened and sweat coated his forehead at the possibility his ministry had been founded on nothing more than evangelical traditionalism. As a diversion, Mac tried to recall the last time he felt as disturbed as he did at this very moment. It was about three years ago, he remembered, when Vivian handed Mac the phone, sympathy on her face. His dad had died of a stroke. He was aged, he was wanting to be with the Lord, but such reasoning did little to stem Mac's grief. Part of his foundation and his identity was cruelly removed, and he was a wounded little boy. And now another chunk, an even larger chunk, both of his foundation and his very identity as a person, was being assailed. His life's contributions now seemed deficient; his purpose questionable.

Vivian came into the bedroom with Katie's note.

"Good!" Mac said. "I've got a date with an angel tonight, an angel in pigtails!"

"A new book?" Vivian asked. "I haven't seen that one before."

"Reuben Tanner gave it to me to read."

"Oh?" The plumber's name made Vivian shift from cordial to annoyed. "Is he now giving spiritual direction to the pastor?"

"I gave my word. I must read this book."

"You gave your word?..... again?"

Mac needed a companion at this tender moment, not a critic. "I got him to promise me to read Martin Johnston's book. I couldn't turn him down when he asked me to read this one. So I'm compelled to read it."

"Really? And did you talk to him about Sunday?"

"Sunday?"

"Yes, Sunday. You *did* tell him he won't be speaking."

"No."

"Well, Terry, when are you going to tell him?"

"I'm not. I gave my word he could have the pulpit two successive Sundays. I am bound to my word."

Vivian's calm was fast dissipating. "No! You can't do that! You gave your word *before* all the damage was done. You simply made a mistake in judgment. Under the circumstances you are not obligated to keep your word."

"Aren't I?"

"What did the board say?"

"Much the same thing you just said."

"And?"

"And I said to them what I said to you. I gave my word!" Mac was loosing it, and matched Vivian's fire.

"Suppose head office finds out? Have you thought of that?"

"Johnston already knows."

"You told him?!" Vivian screeched.

"Somebody else did."

"But who?"

"I don't know. I guess it doesn't really matter, does it?"

"Did Johnston phone you? What did he say?"

"He insinuated if Tanner speaks I will not get the posting as his assistant."

Vivian was horrified, the door to an improved life was closing. "And what did you tell him?"

"The same thing I told the board and the same thing I am telling you, I am bound to my word."

"You're throwing away our future!"

"I am trying to do what is right! Isn't that what a Christian is supposed to do?"

"It seems like the board and the superintendent do not agree with your idea of right. Nor do I. And now you have another problem."

Mac was up and getting dressed, agitated and fueled to fight back. He had been pushed around enough. "Now what is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I won't be there on Sunday. And how do you think that is going to look?"

"It won't look nice at all. I'm surprised you would put your own pride before the good of the congregation!"

"And I'm surprised you would put a plumber before your wife."

"I don't understand."

"Think about it, *Pastor Mac!* I walked out of the church because the plumber was undermining my husband! I stood up for you! Letting him speak again is making a statement! It is telling the entire church you choose him over me! You will publicly insult me! I won't be there!"

"Did it ever occur to you that you shouldn't have walked out? Don't you see how it fanned the fire?"

"And don't you see the loyalty I displayed for you? Have you forgotten what we taught the twins? - a family sticks together. But apparently Pastor Mac has no loyalty left over for his family, having used it all up on the plumber!"

Mac was not going to back down. Their voices resounded through the house; the twins were in school, and he had a lot of stuff to get out of him. "And have you forgotten that *I* am the pastor?! *I* am the one who gets paid to run this church, not you! And I am the husband, and head of this family! I am not going to let a controlling woman usurp my authority!"

Spats of this intensity were rare in the Maclin marriage. Vivian was equally determined to win. "You can run your church! It's yours! Satisfied? It is all yours! But I am no longer in the picture! I will no longer be the decorous pastor's wife sitting dutifully in the front row!"

"You can't mean that! Surely your need to control does not surpass the good of the church! The good of your own children!"

"How can you speak about the good of the church and the children?" Composure gone, Vivian was being quite real and quite loud. "You are putting everyone at risk with your twisted sense of righteousness! If you publicly insult me by allowing that man behind the pulpit I will not be in that church again! Not ever! Do you hear me?!"

"Oh yes, you will be there on Sunday morning!"

"Really?"

"Yes, really! As soon as you realize my - our - paycheck is at risk! Think about it! This house, our two cars, the credit cards, and all the etceteras! How can I pay for them when I no longer have a paycheck?" Out the bedroom and down the stairs Mac went, heading for the coffee pot for a refill.

"I won't be blackmailed! There are other churches, lots of churches!"

"Not any that would pay as well as this one! You see, after the word gets around I have a wife who is likely to stomp out of church, the most I could hope for is an assistant to a pastor who could turn out to be a control freak, like the one I assisted twenty years ago!"

And then they both saw Kyle sitting at the kitchen table, a bowl of cereal in front of him.

"Kyle!" The volume of Mac's voice dropped to a whisper. "I thought..... we thought ..... we heard the car leaving. Why aren't you in school?"

There was no warmth in Kyle's response. "A late exam. I don't have to be there until ten. Besides, my sister and I don't ride together anymore. It's got something to do with loyalty to my parents and the denomination they taught me to honor. I take the bus."

And then, "Is this what you two do when we're gone?"

"Kyle, no!" Vivian responded.

"Son, I'll give you a ride," Mac added. "We can talk about this."

"I would rather take the bus." And out into the rain he went.

thursday evening, june 7th, 2007

The *MorLord Worship Band* practicing in the sanctuary tonight and last night in preparation for Saturday's performance was as divided as the rest of the church.

Kyle Maclin. The band captain was still smarting from this morning. Never had he seen his parents brawl before, though he suspected their relationship was not near as warm as they portrayed. While his hands were occupied with making his electric guitar produce acceptable sounds, his heart was trying to determine where to place his loyalty. Should it be with the denomination? After all, he was about to deposit his future into its hands. Or should it be with his mom? She has been faithful over the years, always the dutiful mother, competently she served the *Center,* always the supreme coordinator fitting everybody's pieces together to make life flow evenly. Or should he set his loyalty on his dad? His dad has always been his mentor and hero; had he reason to stop adulating him now? Yes, he had made a mistake allowing that Tanner access to the pulpit, but he has admitted his poor judgment. Everyone makes mistakes, even heroes.

Listening to his parents fight, Kyle had learned that his dad was offered the posting of assistant

superintendent, and he was impressed. But now that was not going to happen. *Thank you, Mr. Tanner.* Kyle had not spoken to John Tanner for days. No, it wasn't fair, but to do so might be seen as disloyalty to his parents. Kyle caught the inference when John said to his father in the dugout, "I love you, Dad." He was letting everyone know he was siding with his father. Until this matter was settled their friendship was on hold.

Kyle was also angry with his sister. A little while ago he arranged getting Katie and John together; now he was determined to keep them apart. Whether she liked it or not, he had become his sister's guardian. Fraternizing with the enemy would go against the cause.

Todd Anderson. Thanks to Katie Maclin, Todd had made a serious shift in his life. A spirit of bitterness had taken root in his young soul when the band chose whom he considered a less talented, less deserving vocalist to be lead. They all played favoritism at his expense, wanting to please the privileged Maclins. Mr. Tanner's sermon calling the people back to Christ moved him, convicted him, but not enough to bring him to repentance. But when Katie Maclin grabbed him by the arm, tears streaking her face, and said, "Todd, please forgive me! I am so …… very …… sorry! Will you *please* forgive me?" the bitterness lost its grip and Todd returned to his Master more sincerely than ever. Katie insisted Todd replace her as lead, much to Kyle's annoyance, and tonight he had a lot of catching up to do.

Tanya Borric. Tanya, a support vocalist, was one of the few who did not need to hear Mr. Tanner's exhortation; she was already on track with Christ, mostly because of the influence of her father, Tony Borric. But the words were a comfort indeed, and helped fortify her commitment to Christ. Since Sunday morning her prayers had more depth, more fervency. She felt privileged to be able to sing praises to her Lord before much of the populace of Bryden Falls. Tonight she was pondering the words of Jesus, "Whoever confesses Me before men, him will the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God."

Marie Schierling. Marie, on the keyboard, never had been born of the Holy Spirit; she never really *got it;* she was one of those on the outside thinking she was on the inside because she did as the insiders did, prayed as they prayed, spoke as they spoke, worked as they worked. But that was before Sunday. Jeni Tanner found the young lady weeping, broken, confused, and gently led her to a decision for Christ. Since then Katie adopted Marie into her heart, and the two have since been knitted together.

Mark Rogers. Mark loved to pound drums, and it mattered little if it was in tune to Christian music or secular. In Mark's head there was always a rhythm happening that needed his accompaniment. If he didn't have sticks he used his hands; if he didn't have drums he used a table or desk or his legs. He bounced from church to church wherever opportunities led him. Mark wasn't at the *Center* on Sunday; he was drumming elsewhere. Though a bit spiritually dense he immediately picked up the negative vibes within the band. The news of the split at the *Center* was rapidly spreading to other

churches, and Mark was well aware. Who is on who's side, which side should he choose? - questions he was trying to sort out as he pounded his drums.

Jenna Morgan. Jenna was sweet on Kyle, and though Kyle never hinted interest in Jenna, Jenna was not without hope. The split in the church was an opportunity to demonstrate her loyalty to the handsome band captain, to inch her way into his favor. Who he ignored, she ignored, his enemy was her enemy, his ally her ally.

No longer was she on friendly terms with Katie and John, and the others instinctively knew that warmth towards either of the two would be at the cost of her friendliness.

Katie Maclin. When Katie was ten, eleven and twelve she had a special, unusually intimate relationship with Christ. Somehow, maybe it was the excessive adulation of parents and friends, her focus changed from Christ to Katie. With self-absorbedness came selfishness. With selfishness came manipulation of others. But all that was changed by the direct words of Mr. Tanner, beckoning her to return to her First Love. And she was determined to never ever remove Christ from the throne of her life again.

She feared John had made a decision to go on in life without her; she looked for, ached for, eye contact, but there was none; the relationship had ended before it began. And could she blame him? Who would want to partner with a control freak? If only they could talk. If only she could express her heart. She no longer wanted her way; she wanted Christ's way, whatever that be. She would submit to her husband as unto the Lord.

Choosing Christ had the appearance of choosing Mr. Tanner. But Mr. Tanner was only the messenger. Yes, praise God for his courage, but she sided with Christ alone. Her loyalty was thoughtfully placed on Him. Why couldn't her family see that? Is that why her dad wanted to see her tonight, to draw her loyalty back into the family fold?

No matter what anyone thought - Kyle, John, whoever - Katie Maclin would sing praises to her God with all the talent God had given her. Before the lost and the saved she would offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving to her Sin-bearer, the One she called, "Lord,Lord," the One who lovingly wooed her back to Him.

John Douglas Tanner. John was confused. He had chosen Christ over Katie but the attraction to her was stronger than before. Though he ignored her, he noticed the pigtails. And her movements. And her laughter, a different laughter than before, not the *do-you-notice-me?* laughter, but a genuine mirth. She seemed real, somehow. What happened?

And why was Todd doing lead?

And why was Jenna cold to him?

And why was Mark so quiet?

John seriously considered quitting, though a quitter he wasn't. What would be best for the band, for the people they were supposed to be ministering to? Perhaps he should not be so close to Katie. Perhaps the band would have a better chance at coming together if he excused himself. Something to talk over with his dad, he thought.

His dad. What he must be going through. The pressure must be intense. How did all this happen? Why would God choose a plumber to speak to the congregation? Was it really the voice of God his dad heard?

Being eighteen isn't easy.

thursday, june 7th, 2007, 9:15 p.m.

Mac went over his day as he sat in *Mario's* waiting for his daughter. He had a few more regrets to add to his lengthening list. He wished he had never agreed to read Roo's book. He was ashamed of the angry words he spoke to his wife. He regretted his son seeing Mom and Dad at their very worst. And with a quick glance at the opening front door he had another regret: Katie brought three of her friends.

"Daddy, I invited Marie and Tanya and Todd to join us for a little while."

Mac genuinely loved these kids but they were his *ministry,* he was on vacation, he wanted to be alone with his pigtails. "Hi, guys! Glad you could join us! Are you hungry?"

It was Todd who spoke up. "We don't want to bust your party, Pastor Mac. We each have something to say and then we will be off. Is that okay?"

Mac was curious and a little uptight. He didn't need more complaints. "Sure. Have a seat."

"Are you ready to order?" the waitress asked.

"Please give us a few minutes. We'll call you when we're ready," Mac spoke pleasantly to the plump lady.

"Pastor Mac," said Tanya Borric, "I know our church is, like, going through a lot of problems, and a lot of people are, like, against Mr. Tanner and everything, and a lot of people don't want him to speak on Sunday, but I feel it's only right to, like, tell you that I really enjoyed his message, you know, his talk about Jesus and everything. I know I'm just a kid but I, like, thought you might want to know that Mr. Tanner, well, he, like, helped me in my walk with Jesus, you know, I feel, like, stronger somehow."

"Thank you, Tanya. I appreciate your comments." What else could Mac say?

And then it was Todd's turn. "I recommitted my life to Christ after being challenged by Mr. Tanner."

"You did?" Mac was genuinely surprised.

"Well, Katie had something to do with it," he grinned at Katie.

"And you, Marie?" Mac knew the young lady was nervous.

"I received Jesus Christ as my lord and savior on Sunday morning. I'm different now, you know? I can't really explain it. I guess it's what the Bible calls being born again."

"But Marie, I thought ……"

"I know, Pastor. I guess everybody thought I was a Christian. But I always knew something was missing, you know? Like, I was empty inside."

"And now?"

"Pastor Mac," her smile was big, "I feel just great, you know? I just love singing praises to Jesus. Before it was, you know, just words. Now it's different, you know?"

"I know, Marie."

The three got up to leave. Mac looked at Katie inquiringly, and Katie nodded an affirmative nod. "No! Katie and I want you to join us! Let's have pizza! Lots of pizza! Let's eat and talk and eat some more! Tell me, how did the practice go? Are you ready for Saturday night?"

friday afternoon, june 8th, 2007

Tree was the president of the division's *American Northwestern Men's Baseball League.* Knowing that the ball field at Bryden Falls would be in bad shape, it had been raining steadily a couple of days now, he phoned his bud to check it out.

"Hey, Pastor Mac! Is Canada still where we left it on Tuesday or did it float away?"

"How am I? Bitter. That bad call from the ump at home plate cost us the game and the championship."

"Yea, I'll bet you're sorry."

"What do you mean *we* were due for a win? It wasn't *we* that beat us, it was *him!"*

"*Him* is that back catcher! What's his name? Roo? He won the game for you guys. First a grand slam home run. Then he strikes three of us out with less than ten pitches, and he isn't even a pitcher! And then the guy hits a deep inside pitch to bring in the winning run."

"Sure there were there eight other guys on the field. I noticed them standing around. But enough small talk. What shape is your diamond in? Has it been raining as much there as here?"

"A swimming pool, eh? Yeah, I told the *Pirates* coach tonight's game was canceled. Any chance of playing a make-up game with the *Pirates* tomorrow? We are supposed to get sunshine tomorrow."

"Well, how about Sunday?"

"Nope. Sunday afternoon is out. The regular season is officially over 1:00 p.m. Sunday, June 10th. Any chance you can cancel your Sunday service and play in the morning?"

"What do you mean you will have to make a phone call? I thought you were the captain of that ship."

"Used to be, huh. Now listen, pal, I want you to understand something. If you don't play the *Pirates,* you're in by default."

"That's what I said, default. I've gone over both your total runs scored and runs scored against you, and the *Challengers* scored better than the *Pirates.* That means if you can't play a make-up game the *Challengers* are in the playoffs, and the *Pirates* are out. Got it? I checked with the directors and we all agree you are not obligated to cancel your service on such a short notice."

"That's right, you got it, bud. You pastors are very keen. If you say no, you won't cancel your Sunday service, you are automatically in the playoffs - for the first time and probably the last."

"No, don't make that phone call yet. Let me get a hold of the *Pirates* coach, and run it by him. I'm going to tell him that he is at your mercy; the guy is a bit of a jerk and I want to see him suffer in suspense for a while. Before we go any further he's going to have to assure me he can get his team up there Sunday morning should you decide to cancel your service. I am sure he will twist arms if he has to."

"That's right. I'll let you know if it's a go tonight. Don't go to bed early."

"Yea, later, pal."

Sipping coffee at the kitchen table Mac tried to assimilate this new development. *Is the rain a curse or a blessing?* If it were not for giving Reuben his word he wouldn't hesitate to cancel the Sunday service, but now he had to let Tanner make that decision.

The rain is a curse, Mac concluded. He wanted to get Sunday's service over with so he could start the patching up process. He already made an appointment with Superintendent Johnston for Tuesday of the following week. The only disagreement between them was Tanner's preaching on Sunday. But soon Sunday would be history. Mac would explain, again, he felt obligated to keep his word, though a foolish word it was. Surely the man would understand that. Surely he wouldn't dismiss a long record of faithful service because of one disagreement, because he was standing on principle. He will invite the superintendent to be guest speaker at a series of meetings Mac planned to hold for the purpose of diluting the negative effects of Tanner's message. But if this thing dragged out for another week it would keep everyone on edge, including the superintendent.

And then he thought, *Perhaps the rain is a blessing.* Had he not agreed to let Tanner speak two *successive* Sundays? If Tanner canceled the service it would mean no preaching by the plumber. Ever. Everyone, well, mostly everyone, would be happy - Martin Johnston, the board of elders, Vivian, Kyle, most of the congregation. If Roo *didn't* cancel the *Challengers* were sure to be in the

playoffs, and plan A would still be in effect.

And then Mac thought, *But suppose Roo asks if he can preach the* following *Sunday? That's easy, I'll just say no.* "No! No! No!" he practiced out loud. "No! No! No!" he said again. *Sorry, pal, I kept my word. I said two successive Sundays. I am not obligated to let you have the pulpit next Sunday. For the good of the congregation I will have to refuse you.*

Mac already asked Phil to contact the *Challengers* regarding the cancel of tonight's game. There was nothing for Mac to do but wait for Tree's call.

friday, june 8th, 2007, 10:15 p.m.

It was late when the phone finally rang, Vivian had gone to bed, Mac was trying to finish *The Way It Is* so he could put it behind him.

"About time," Mac answered the phone in a not unfriendly voice, knowing who it was.

"Good. I thought they would. It should be a good game - if there is one. Too bad you couldn't be here to see it."

"Yes, I know, bud. I feel bad for you and Sally and the kids. I wish I could be there for you."

"Are you sure that's best, I mean, no communication whatsoever? You are still their father. And I know Sally has strong feelings for you."

"I won't argue with you, Tree. I just feel bad, that's all. Will you be okay when they're gone?"

"Tell you what. Let's set a definite time to get together, say, every two weeks. We could meet for lunch somewhere between your place and mine. What do you think?"

"I know you don't need a babysitter, and I know you can look after yourself. But that's what friends do, isn't it? Visit and chat and get on each other's nerves."

"Yea, think about it."

"Okay, back to baseball. The next step is to see if our Sunday service can be canceled. Can I put you on hold while I make a phone call?"

"Reuben, you're still up. Pastor Mac here."

"I was up reading your book."

"You too? Are you nearly finished?"

"I hope you're getting something out of it. But that's not why I phoned. I've got the president of the men's baseball league on hold. The only time we can play the *Pirates* is Sunday morning. That means canceling the service. He also said we are not expected to cancel Sunday's service on such short notice, and if we don't play the *Pirates* we are automatically in the playoffs by default. So it's

your call, pal. I gave you my word you can preach two successive services, and I will keep my word. Just say no and you can preach as agreed, and the *Challengers* are in the playoffs. Do you want some time to think about it?"

"Really? Are you sure? You don't want time to think about it?"

"Okay, Roo, whatever you say. Can I put you on hold for a minute?"

"Tree? Still there?"

"It looks like there will be a ball game Sunday morning. Let's make it 10:00 a.m. That will give us time to deal with the wet diamond."

"I know. If we lose we are out of the playoffs. The person I was talking to thought it wouldn't be right to win by default."

"Okay, Tree, hope to see you in the playoffs."

"What's that?'

"Oh …… yes …… love you too, Tree."

"Yea, later."

Strange, Mac thought. *Tree never said I love you before. Sunday will be a rough day for him and his family. Why couldn't I be there for him?*

"Roo? Still there?"

"It's settled. I'll get Pastor Phil to cancel the service and tell everyone there will be a game at ten. Do you think you can come a bit early to help with the diamond?"

"Thanks. I must say that was big of you. I know you wanted to preach the last half of your message. I think, however, this is best for the church. I guess the Lord wanted it this way."

"And a good night to you, Roo."

Yes!! Praise the Lord! It's over! It's really over! I can't believe it! Thank God for rain! I'll never complain about rainy days again!

saturday night, june 9th, 2007

The stars were a welcome sight to everyone at *Foundation Fathers Festival.* The forecasted rain had passed and fair summer weather was promised, though heavy rain was on its way again. Friday night festivities had been canceled, and Saturday night's turnout was larger than anyone expected. The *MorLord Worship Band* would be the highlight, following a comedian act and a gymnastics exhibit. The band would perform until 10:30, and the festival would end with a fireworks display.

The opportunity to give witness to Christ and His awesome salvation through song and music was more favorable than any other time in the history of the band. Never before had the worship band performed before such a huge audience. Hearts are more open to the message of Christ during a time of celebration, a time when hope can penetrate normally closed hearts; spiritually, it was a unique opportunity.

The young band members tuning up on the stage had the appearance of being prepared and confident. In fact, they were neither. They were not *together,* and because they were so fractured they had not come together to pray. Nor did they have much prayer support from the distracted congregation. Todd had not yet conquered lead, and Kyle's visible impatience was reducing what confidence he had. Every band member was the victim of stage fright, intensifying as the crowd swelled.

Musical harmony refused to come. The sounds that came out of Todd's voice were not at all indicative of the young man's talent. John's mellow violin, meant to accentuate pleasant music, was an annoyance. The audience chattered and fidgeted. The *Center* people, out in large numbers, were embarrassed for their band. Midway through the program Kyle presented the gospel message, and though his presentation was flawless, the gospel emitted from a heart bitter and confused loses much of its power.

Reuben and Jeni were standing behind the seated audience holding hands. Reuben felt responsible for the poor performance on stage. He was now certain he had made a mistake; he should never have asked permission to preach. Had he stuck to his pipe wrenches and coveralls, the locals and tourists would now be getting a proper presentation of the gospel. The rain had broken what was left of his resolve, for the rain was not of man but from God. God had spoken His will through the rain, obviously to rescue *Bryden Falls Community Christian Center* from further injury. And there was nothing Reuben could do to repair the rift he had caused. He couldn't even publicly apologize to the congregation; he would never be allowed access to the pulpit again.

On the other side of the audience Mac and Vivian were standing together, not holding hands. Mac, too, felt responsible for the lackluster concert, and he ached for his twins and the other band members, feeling their tension and embarrassment. Mac was certain the city councilors would never invite the *MorLord* band to perform again. *If only I had said no!* And again and again, *If only I had said no!*

Tomorrow will be a better day. Mac was optimistic the *Challengers* would give the *Center* a boost, and recover some of its lost esteem.

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 8:15 a.m.

Henry reached retirement age a few years ago, but refused to let go of the job he loved. He never tired of the regard the public gave him whenever he asked, "Do you have anything to declare?" or, "In what country were you born, Madam," or, "How long will you be in Canada?" When he asked

questions he searched their eyes for fear, an indicator they had something to hide. He was good at what he did, forty years as border security guard gave him a nose for mischief. The moment he retired he would stop being a somebody; he had no reason to call it quits.

The *Pirates* came through his station in two's and three's, and sometimes with their families, starting at 8:00 a.m.

"Good morning, guys," he said to one familiar carload. "A big game this morning?"

"Well, I can't wish you luck. I know the *Challengers* need this game as much as you guys."

"Well, maybe. But I hear they're playing fine ball, lately. They beat the *Grizzlies* a few days ago."

"Drive safe now."

Henry was all baseball. He watched the *Challengers-Grizzlies* game and enjoyed seeing the rowdy *Grizzlies* get their dues. His night shift would be over in an hour; maybe he would take in the last half of this morning's game. Should be a good one.

Henry was surprised to see *Reuben's Plumbing* van heading towards the States, approaching the American customs station. Close enough to see Reuben Tanner in his *Challengers* uniform, he could only conclude, *That boy's going the wrong way! The fool thinks the game is across the border!* And then, less than a minute later, he recognized the Tanner mini van, the Tanner woman doing the driving. *Strange they aren't traveling together. They both seem to be in a hurry. Boy, are they in for a surprise when they find out the game is being played in their own baseball diamond!*

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 8:35 a.m.

John interrupted Mac making up the batting order. "Mr. Maclin, my dad asked me to tell you he has a pressing matter to attend to today."

"No, John! You mean he will miss the entire game?!"

"Yes, sir."

"But this is a crucial game! We need him!"

No! No! No! Mac wailed an inward wail. *Tanner, how could you do this to me? To your team? To the church?* And then, *Well, marine, you better get tough. Don't let your team down. This game is ours, with or without Tanner!*

Yet the marine knew he was in for the fight of his baseball career. A win *with* Tanner was never simple; a win *without* Tanner would be a real challenge. Pitching to Phil Ferguson just wasn't the same as pitching to Roo. Phil was nervous back there, never kept his glove a still target like Roo did, didn't know the signals, and he wouldn't know what signals to give if he did. Until this game Mac never realized how dependent he was on Roo's calm expertise. And they really needed Roo's

batting. He was dependable, the equalizer that made up for the weakness of most others on the team. He usually managed to get on base - if he didn't get a hit it was because he got a walk; he got walked because they were nervous to throw him anything he could hit. Because he got on base so often, he scored much more than anyone on the team.

Mister Maclin? Why did John call me Mister *Maclin? I wonder who he got that from?* Of course, Mac knew John was influenced by his father, the only one in the congregation who didn't call him *Pastor.*

Those two words, *Mister Maclin,* said much to Mac, none of which was pleasant. John was declaring himself to be with his dad. Worse, John was turning his back on his denomination and a future as a pastor. And still worse, John would never be his son-in-law.

And John's siblings? Will I be Mister to them, or Pastor? And Jeni? She undoubtedly will follow her husband. Mac was certain the rebellion that had spread from Reuben to his family would certainly extend to other families. Mac knew a confrontation with Reuben Tanner was just around the corner, after the baseball season of course. Tanner was a must if they hoped to win the playoffs.

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 8:35 a.m.

"Jeni, I think this is where we part company," Reuben said to his wife on the cell as they came to a T intersection, twenty minutes south of the border. You turn left and head east, and I'll go west to River's Bend."

"I hope you do, too, honey. I would say they have an hour's start on you, maybe more. We may fade in and out on our cells, but the Lord never fades out. I'll be praying for you."

It was a mistake that Shep, offspring of their first Shep, was at his side in the front of the van. Roo was in such a rush he never thought of the old shepherd collie asleep in the back on an old pair of coveralls.

The morning started with the Tanner family getting prepared for the big game, Reuben was in uniform when Jeni came into the bedroom.

"Reuben, something's wrong! With Trevor Kenny, I mean! The Lord spoke to me. I think you have to find him!"

"Now?"

"Yes, now!"

"But Jeni, I can't! The game. They need me!"

"Trevor needs you, Reuben."

"But I don't know where he is. I think he lives in River's Bend, but that's a big place. How will I find him? And if I find him, then what?"

"You *must* find him or it will be too late! And I must find Sally and her two children. I was praying for them, knowing this was the time they were saying their final good-byes. The Lord wants me to find them and bring them back here!"

"Here?"

"Yes! To live with us..... for one year! They're deeply wounded, and they're headed for a huge city of strangers. They need stability. Sally needs our family to bring strength and healing to her family."

"John!" Roo called downstairs to his oldest, also in his *Challengers* uniform.

"John, we can't explain, but Mom and I have something important to do. We have to put some heavy responsibility on your shoulders. Are you willing?"

"Anything, Dad."

"Take the kids in the crew-cab pickup to the ball game. Instruct them to sit together in the bleachers during the game in a place where you can easily see them. Tell them not to respond to any negative comments they might hear about me. As soon as the game is over bring them all straight home again. We may be the entire day."

"Got it."

"Tell Mr. Maclin I have a pressing matter to attend to."

"He won't like it."

"You're right, he won't like it. This game means a lot to him."

"And the whole team."

"Yes, and the entire church. But you have a good chance of winning without me."

CHAPTER NINE

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 9:30 a.m.

Sally had to fight off tears so she could see the road. She just wanted to go, go fast and go far, far away from the pain of final departure, far away from the man she was determined to stop loving, the father of her two most precious valuables.

The good-bye was wicked.

Trevor was leaning against his shiny black pickup when they arrived a few minutes late at the designated park, his mustache trimmed, he seemed dressed for fishing, his favorite fishing shirt covered a cotton T-shirt. Each waited for the other to speak but no one did. The words had already been said. First it was Sally's turn. Trevor accepted her embrace, not an extended embrace, they did

not want to drag this out. Sally looked up into her man's face for the last time. Tree's expression was rigid; he would not allow tears; he still had marine in him. Sally stretched to kiss his cheek, and turned to the car.

Kay-Lyn was confused and angry. Why must she lose her father? What had she done that this could happen to her? Trevor let her hold him for a long time, her head leaning against his chest. Kay-Lyn wanted to say *I love you, Daddy.* She wanted to say, *I will never forget you, Daddy.* She wanted to say, *Good-bye, Daddy.* But words remained inside. Kay-Lyn joined her mom in the car, leaving the side door open for Brandon.

Brandon was a tall lad, his posture noble, like his dad's, even though he often slouched, like his dad. He could not see through tears that wouldn't be stayed, he didn't move, his head drooped helpless in the cool June morning. Trevor rested a hand on the young man's shoulder. Brandon could feel the squeeze of his dad's hand and considered it might be a token of affection. Tree felt his son's body shuddering with grief and could take no more; it was he who would leave. As he pulled away Brandon seized the bottom of his father's open shirt and wouldn't let go. A son needs a dad, any kind of a dad is better than none at all, and as long as Brandon hung on to the shirt, there was hope. Trevor undid the cuff buttons, removed his shirt, climbed into his F150, and drove away leaving his family behind. He took a final look in his rearview to see the minivan, side door open, his son motionless, head drooping, clinging to the shirt hanging down to the pavement.

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 10:15 a.m.

The diamond was still in rough shape because of two days of heavy rain. The game should have been well underway, but both teams were still trying to work the large puddles out of the pitcher's and batters area. The *Pirates* were eager to help, carrying sand from the sidelines to fill in the holes of water, raking the diamond, marking the lines with white powder; they knew if the game couldn't be played the last playoff spot would go to the *Challengers.*

Warming up his arm on the sideline, Mac was distracted and Mac was angry. John's words, "My dad asked me to tell you he had a pressing matter to attend to," thoroughly peeved Mac, because he knew better. Roo *never* missed a game. Mac was *certain* why Roo didn't show up. Revenge.

This was Roo's opportunity to get back at him. Mac didn't offer him use of the pulpit the following Sunday and this was Reuben's retaliation. And Mac had to admit he hadn't displayed sportsman character. Had not Roo conceded to allow the *Challengers* and *Pirates* to play this morning when he could have said no? It was Mac's place to respond in good faith, but he wasn't about to forfeit an opportunity to get everyone out of a big mess.

Still, this was a brutal retaliation, and Mac was irritated. *I suppose the* pressing matter *is a leaky faucet! Maybe he had to collect an unpaid account! Maybe his van was overdue for an oil change! Had the service not been canceled the* pressing matter *wouldn't have kept him from the pulpit!* Perhaps, Mac reasoned, Roo wanted to strike out at the entire church because of their reaction to his

message; everyone would be sorely disappointed if they didn't make the playoffs.

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 10:35 a.m.

First inning. The *Pirates* immediately sensed the weakness Roo's absence made. Whenever a batter made it to first base it was an easy steal to second, Phil's throw from home plate being less than fast and less than accurate; a fast runner could make it to third. Mac and Phil were not *connecting.* Phil often forgot the signals and that caused him to miss the ball, allowing runners to steal home for a score. The *Pirates* got an early six to nothing lead.

Third inning. In the third inning the *Challengers* had three men on base with two out. Normally, Reuben would be at bat with a good chance at scoring some runs. His replacement struck out. The *Challengers* were still behind 6 to 2.

Sixth inning. Mac was still confident they could come from behind. He steadied the guys in the dugout, he focused hard on each pitch, he had plenty of arm left, probably enough for the entire game. And his team was beginning to hit. If only Phil could catch the ball and get the signals right! Bottom of the sixth found the bases loaded again though it cost the *Challengers* two outs to make that happen. This time John Tanner was at bat, a heavy hitter and the *Pirates* knew it. Everyone, outfielders and infielders, backed up. John fooled them. He laid an unsuspecting bunt down the third baseline, scoring a run. Mac was next to bat and he was determined to smash that ball. And he did. The inning closed 6 to 5.

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 10:35 a.m.

Trevor Kenny was in a rage driving into the hills heading for his fishing site on Bryden River, northwest of River's Bend. Grief and anger were released in guttural groans and much cursing. As usual, God, who couldhave and shouldhave but didn't, was blamed for everything. Tree swung his fist at Him but only managed to hit the windshield. Since he couldn't hit God with his fist he hit him with words, ugly words used only by the shameless, words that surely could never be forgiven.

Tree wasn't pained so much at the loss of his family as his family's loss of him. Hurting his family was nothing new. Countless times he kept them on edge while he spent long nights with the guys at the pub, murmuring against everything bad, everything good, and everything in-between, which seemed to have the effect of increasing his self-worth. His humor and interest were for others; his family got his grumpiness and not much else. But this morning was a different grief for his family, a ripping, gashing pain not to be forgotten for many months.

Yet it had to be, Tree was convinced. His family deserved more than this. Best they kiss this life good-bye and reach out for something better, somewhere else.

After parking his F150 in an inconspicuous place at a hunter's camp he hiked the mile through the bush to his favorite fishing spot where he had caught lots of trout over the years and downed plenty of beer. The river was full and fast because of the rain, making the appearance of accidental

drowning more irrefutable.

For an hour he fished catching three keepers, drank a couple of beer, dumped a few more on the rocks. He left his rod and a light jacket on a slope too steep for safety. Now he must hike to his cabin unseen, not letting anyone get a glimpse of his unusual tall stature or his identifiable mustache.

Sunday, june 10th, 2007, 10:35 a.m.

Jeni could only guess Sally would take this highway until it took her to an Interstate heading east. And she could only hope the Kennys would make a stop, gas or breakfast, before the Interstate, or catching them would be near hopeless. She looked to the left and right at every gas station, looking for a red mini van, though not sure red was the right color. Uncharacteristically, she broke every speed limit and hoped she wouldn't be stopped by a vigilant law enforcer.

Sally was forty-five minutes ahead. It wasn't the need for gas or hunger for the breakfast they have yet to have that made her pull over into the last café/gas stop before the Interstate, but a need to wash up, to splash their faces with cool water. Once here, they decided to gas up and attempt a breakfast; once on the Interstate they wouldn't stop until dark. Each only nibbled on their breakfast, and Sally asked for a to-go cup for her coffee.

Were they here? Jeni was not talking to herself but to her Lord as she passed the café but seeing nothing red. *What chance have I got to catch up now? Maybe they're not going on the Interstate. And if they get off how could I ever find them?* Both faith and hope were shrinking. Nonetheless she circled the ramp, got into the passing lane and drove fast as she dared.

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 10:45 a.m.

Roo found a dozen Kennys in the phone book and called them all. Those who didn't answer, he drove to the address, sure he would recognize Tree's black pick-up. And then he remembered Tree sometimes talking into a cell and concluded he wasn't listed. Now what? He couldn't phone Mac, he was playing ball. Nor did he want to. He could imagine the conversation:

"Do you know Tree's address?"

"Sure. Why are you looking for Tree?"

"I think he may be in trouble."

"Trouble? What kind of trouble?"

"I don't know."

"Why do think he might be in trouble?"

"I don't know." He wouldn't implicate his Jeni.

"You mean you are missing the most important game of the season because you *think* Tree is in

trouble, but you don't know *why* you think Tree is in trouble?"

No, Roo wouldn't want to talk to Mac.

He inquired at a few gas stations, "A tall man, very tall, early forties, walrus mustache."

"Sorry," the reply was always the same.

And then, "Have you heard of the *Grizzlies,* River's Bend's baseball team?"

"Sure. This is a baseball town."

"Do you know where their baseball field is?"

"The other side of town. I'll show you on a map. Nice dog you got there. Purebred?"

"Yes. We have had him for a long time. Could I buy that map? I think I'll need one."

"You can have it if you gas up here."

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 12:20 p.m.

Seventh inning. Neither team scored, yet it was evident it was the *Challengers* who were the threat. The momentum was changing, and Mac was positive. Since the base runners could easily steal bases once they got on, Mac reached down into himself to throw his best ever, and managed to tickle the corners of the plate barely within the strike zone and struck them out, one by one.

Eighth inning. The *Challengers* were still one run behind, eight to seven. At the bottom of the eighth it was the *Challengers* weakest link in the batting order. The *Pirates* pitcher struck the first *Challengers* batter out but, oddly, the *Pirates* changed pitchers. After ten rather slow warm-up pitches the ump impatiently called, "Play ball!" Phil was next on the batting order, a so-so hitter, and could only hit a weak grounder to first base for the second easy out. But Mac wasn't disturbed. He knew he would face the *Pirates* weakest hitters in the top of the ninth, and his pitching was very good today. And for the bottom of the ninth he had a bold strategy.

Mac told the third batter to purposely strike out so that the next hitter on the batting order, John Tanner, would be the leadoff hitter in the ninth. There was a good chance that John, one of the *Challengers* best hitters, facing the *Pirates* number two pitcher, would get on base with a hit or a walk. Once John got on, he would signal John to steal second, and Mac, following John, would help him out with a swing and a deliberate miss to distract the catcher. No one runs faster than John Douglas Tanner; he would make it to second. The *Challengers* would then have three outs to get John home to tie the game. And if Mac managed to get on base *(I'll get on base if it kills me!),* he could score the winning run.

By now the *Challengers* fans were noisy with excitement. They needed this game to help eradicate the shame of finishing last place so many times, the shame of butt jokes always reserved for weaker

teams. There was a time when winning was quite secondary to their foremost ambition of being a light to the unsaved, an influence for Christ. But the secondary usurped the primary years ago. Like the other teams in the league, winning was paramount.

But what's this? Mac wondered incredulously. *The* Pirates *changing pitchers again? Twice in the same inning?* In comes their number three, another ten slow warm-up pitches. *Dumb,* Mac thought to himself. *Why put in a secondary pitcher now? Sure makes it easier for us. Now we get to face their* number three *pitcher at the bottom of the last inning.* The *Challengers* batter deliberately struck out as planned.

Ninth inning. Mac was standing on the pitcher's mound eagerly waiting for the first batter. But there was no batter. Mac looked to see the *Pirates* coach in a very heated discussion with the umpire, pointing at his watch. The umpire waved Mac into the dialogue.

"Mac," the umpire said, "I'm sorry, the game is over! The regular season ends at 1:00 p.m. and it is now 1:04! I tried to talk the *Pirates* into finishing the game, but they won't budge! Because they are in the lead, the game is theirs. I'm sorry."

"Now wait a minute," Mac protested. "They purposely delayed the game! That's why they changed pitchers twice in one inning!"

"It seems that way. But it's within the rules to change pitchers twice in an inning. If we could have started the ninth inning by 1:00, I would make them play. I'm sorry, Mac! The game is over! The *Pirates* win!"

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 1:15 p.m.

Two hours of speeding the Interstate brought no success in finding the elusive red van. Jeni concluded she either didn't see the van because of trucks and buses and RVs, or she had not caught up to them yet. Perhaps Sally was a faster driver than she was. It took her a while to realize the colored lights of the State Patrol car she spotted in the rear view mirror were for her. She worked her way to the inside lane the quickest she could and came to a stop near a *No Stopping* sign. The officer walking to her car was a young man, well-groomed, sunglassed. *This is it, Lord. I give up. The chase is over.*

"Good afternoon, madam," the young officer's voice was stern.

"Officer, I am sorry! You see, I was trying to catch up..... "

"Please step out of the car, madam."

"But officer, I can explain....."

"Please step out of the car, madam."

"Yes, sir."

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 1:15 p.m.

The scratches tainting Tree's face didn't bother him a little; they wouldn't hurt for long. Staying in the dense trees away from the river kept his tall figure concealed. He hiked a short distance, watched and listened, and walked some more. A few hours later, shortly after one, he came to the backside of his property, confident no one had spotted him. Before getting to work he grabbed a cold one from the fridge. So far, so good.

Tree removed the sod and placed it to one side. Digging the grave the second time was much easier than the first. He dragged a plate of safety glass over the hole, moved the crate on top of the glass, filled the crate with the dirt from the grave, and neatly placed the sod on top of the dirt. Next, he dug a furrow under the glass, big enough for his slender body. He returned to the house to grab another beer and a flashlight. He remembered the last funeral he attended, people placed a few keepsakes in the coffin. *Hmmm,* he thought, *what would be a fitting token for old Tree?* He considered choosing one of his many baseball or bowling trophies, but they would only be a final reminder of his loss of this year's championship. He took the one family picture of a few years ago off the wall, removed it from the heavy frame, scribbled over himself with a felt pen, and returned the picture to its frame.

While squirming into his grave, he thought of the jacket he intended to use to protect his face from the dirt that would fall on him. He backed out, returned with his *Grizzlies* jacket, took a final look around for nosy neighbors, and began to squirm a second time into his grave - when he realized he forgot his pistol. Returning to his house, he lingered a moment, scanned the scanty furniture, looked out the kitchen window, his favorite looking-out spot, sat in his recliner, fully extended, for a few minutes, spun his pistol around his index finger imagining himself a fast gunslinger, waved good-bye to himself in the bathroom mirror, combed his walrus mustache, locked the outside door behind him and squirmed fully into his tomb. From inside he filled the furrow with dirt. *Where is that flashlight?* And after groping around in the dark, *Oh, there it is!*

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 1:25 p.m.

Though wanting to distance herself from River's Bend, Sally felt less intimidated by the slower traffic in the inside lane. She felt for the lone lady she spotted on the side of the highway emerging from her minivan, obviously stopped for a speeding violation. "That's Jeni Tanner!" she exclaimed, pulling over and coming to a sudden stop.

"Mom, who is Jeni Tanner?" Kay-Lyn asked, both teens suddenly alert.

"That's my new friend, the one I've been talking to every morning!" Sally backed up towards Jeni and the uniformed officer searching her car for alcohol or drugs. "What is she doing here..... by herself?!"

Climbing out of her gray minivan, Sally yelled, "Jeni! It's me, Sally!"

"Sally! Thank God I found you!" And they hugged each other in delight under the *No Stopping* sign.

"Jeni! What are you doing here?"

"I've been looking for you and the kids!"

"But why?"

"Excuse me, ladies," the young officer said.

"The Lord wants you and Kay-Lyn and Brandon to come and live with us on the ranch for one year!"

"What? Jeni, you know we are on our way to the east coast!"

"Excuse me ladies," the young man tried again.

"I really think the Lord wants you to come and live with us..... a time of healing. I know it must seem strange, but the Lord spoke to me this morning when I was praying for your family."

"But Jeni, we've got plans! We can't just drop everything now! We just can't..... change directions! We haven't even *met* your family!"

"Excuse me, ladies!" his tone much louder, no longer would he be ignored. "You are both parking under a *No Stopping* sign. And there's the matter of driving 20 mph over the speed limit."

"Officer," Jeni turned to the official, "thank you for pulling me over! God used you to help me find my friend Sally!"

"Sir, Jeni was speeding because she was trying to catch up to us. We are on our way to the east coast."

"I thought they were ahead of me. They just said final good-byes to Sally's husband."

"Near River's Bend," Sally added.

"The Lord spoke to me and told me to catch up to them and bring them back to our ranch!"

"They own a ranch in Canada," Sally tried to be helpful. "Bryden Falls. Her husband plays ball for the *Challengers* and my husband, that is, my ex-husband, the one we said good-bye to this morning, plays for the *Grizzlies.* That's how we met. They are Christians, the entire family."

"Well, I go to church once in a while when the wife pushes me," the officer said somewhat defensively. "I know the salvation message."

"The what?" Sally wanted to know.

"Don't you know?"

"Officer, I didn't say *I* was a Christian. I'm not really sure what one is."

Jeni interrupted, a touch of indignation in her voice. "You mean, young man, you know about

salvation through Jesus Christ and you still haven't received Christ?"

"Sorry, madam. I mean, I thought maybe I would one day, you know, …

"Receive Christ as your Lord and Savior?" Jeni helped out.

"Yes..... that's what I mean..... someday."

"And do you have children?"

"A girl and a boy. Seven and five."

"And what about them?" Jeni demanded. "Shouldn't you be a better example?"

"I'm sorry, madam. I'll give the matter serious reflection. Really."

"Are you going to give my friend a speeding ticket, officer? She doesn't normally speed …… do you Jeni?"

"A speeding ticket is a small thing, Sally. I would never have found you if it wasn't for this gentleman."

"Glad to be of assistance. Now madam," he looked at Sally, "are you going to accept this lady's kind offer?"

"Well, I don't know." Now it was two against one.

"Perhaps you should ask the kids," the officer pointed to the Kenny minivan.

"Sally, I thought you said your van was *red."*

"No, the *interior* is red."

"Oh."

The policeman and Jeni followed Sally.

"Kids, please step out of the van. I want you to meet Jeni Tanner. And this is Officer.....

"Miller, madam."

"This is Officer Miller. Mrs. Tanner has invited us to live with her on her ranch..... in Bryden Falls..... for a year. She has been trying to catch us for two or three hours. They both think it would be good for us, you know, a time to be healed and strengthened. I said we couldn't just drop our plans like that, but Officer Miller suggested we ask you."

Jeni was very gentle. "My name is Jeni Tanner, and I would very much like to be your friend. I know what you've been through. I know you are hurting." And she gave them a warm embrace. "I am a Christian, and the Lord spoke to me this morning when I was praying for you and your mom and dad to go and get you and bring you home with me. I have five children including a daughter a year older

than you, Kay-Lyn. And a son a bit older than you Brandon, but not as tall. You will be good friends. What do you think?"

"Mom?" they both turned to Sally, frowns of confusion on their brows.

"Well, I don't know. This is a family decision. You have school to think about."

"I home school my kids. You and I can teach your children together."

"But I don't know how."

"I will teach you how to teach them."

"But they are already behind, the divorce affected their schooling."

"We will catch up over the summer months," Jeni replied.

"I don't know, Mom," Kay-Lyn said.

"Do you have horses on the ranch?" Officer Miller tried to entice the kids.

"We each have our own horse. And I am sure we can pick one out for Kay-Lyn and Brandon."

"My own horse?" These were the first words Brandon, wearing his dad's fishing shirt, had spoken for hours.

"Yours while you are with us."

"Mom, I *love* horses!" Kay-Lyn too was suddenly enthusiastic.

"Me, too!" Brandon exclaimed.

"I must warn you," Jeni spoke to them all. "It's a different life. No television. Radio is used only for the news. No video games. And no junk food."

"You mean no pop and ice cream and chips?" Kay-Lyn was having second thoughts.

"We make our own ice cream, and our own drinks. We eat popcorn sometimes, and lots of pies. We preserve berries and all kinds of fruit."

"Can we go to town sometimes?"

"That's up to your mother."

"But Jeni," Sally interjected, "is there room for all of us?"

"We have a guest house that has everything except a kitchen. You will each have a bedroom, and we will eat our meals together in the main house."

"Sounds like a dream. Is there room for my family?" Officer Miller kidded.

"It is a great place to raise a family. But it's not all play. There are the horses and other animals to attend to. There is a huge garden that takes a lot of time and energy. And we are always expanding, more barns and sheds and corrals."

"I don't know," Kay-Lyn was hesitant.

"Brandon?" Sally asked her son.

"If we don't go with Mrs. Tanner we end up in a city where we don't know anyone. We will have to go to a school where we don't have any friends."

"Look, kids," said Officer Miller, "this is a once in a lifetime opportunity, don't you see? I was raised in a big city and I moved out because I didn't want to raise my children there. It can be harsh." And then, "Can I make a suggestion? Give it a try for one month. Consider it a summer vacation. And then decide if you want to stay the full year. If you don't like it, carry on with your plans."

"Sounds okay to me," Sally said.

"Do you think your kids will like us?" Kay-Lyn looked pleadingly at Mrs. Tanner.

"I guarantee it."

"Do we have to become Christians?" Brandon wanted to know.

"Only if you chose to. We give the Lord thanks at every meal. We have family devotion time every morning at eight. Attend only if you want to. Also, we have a number of people over Wednesday nights. Our children will be there, but you certainly don't have to."

"Kids, don't you see?" Officer Miller said. "Being a Christian isn't so bad. If this lady were not a Christian she wouldn't be offering to help you." And then, "I'll tell you what. If you decide to go with this lady, I won't give her a speeding ticket. What do you say?"

They said yes, they would try it for a month. And the kids both said, "Thank you Mrs. Tanner."

"Good!" The officer sounded relieved. "I'll show you a better way to get back to Bryden Falls. I will lead you to a highway that takes you north to Canada. From there it's west to Bryden Falls."

"Thank you, officer," Jeni was truly grateful and shook the young man's hand. "You have been a blessing. I want you to come and visit us. Bring your family." And she handed him a *Reuben's Plumbing* business card.

"Do you really mean that? Because if you do, we *will* come and visit. I would like to know how this story turns out."

"Please come, officer," Sally said. "I, too, feel indebted to you."

"Thank you, sir," both kids said.

"Kay-Lyn, would you like to ride with me?" Jeni asked the young lady. "I'm sure we have lots to talk about."

"Follow me, ladies," Officer Miller said with a voice of authority.

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 2:15 p.m.

Roo found the *Grizzlies* baseball field, looked around for a familiar face, and recognized Spike in the batters practice cage, sharpening up for the playoffs to begin in a few days.

"Spike!"

"Roo! You looking for me? I didn't mean to hurt your kid!"

"John's okay, Spike. No, I wasn't looking for you."

"No hard feelings?"

"No hard feelings. Mind if I take a few swings?"

"Be my guest!"

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Roo was the best, and Spike was impressed. "You sure know how to punish a ball!"

"Ninety percent technique, Spike. It's learning to get all the body operating together. You're a pretty good hitter yourself."

"Thanks! I hear you lost your game." Spike held up his cell to indicate how he got the news. "Big of you guys to cancel your church service to play them."

Roo didn't let on he hadn't known and was careful to conceal his disappointment. "Win some, lose some."

"I thought you guys had a good chance. You beat us, and we are stronger than the *Pirates.* Are you sure your kid is okay?"

"John's leg is fine."

"But I seen his leg! Man, it was broken! Some of the guys figured it wasn't really broken but I told them, I know, I'm the one who broke it! I heard it snap! It almost made me sick! I'm real sorry, man!"

"John's leg is fine, Spike. Jesus healed him."

"I can't argue with that. Man, was I relieved to see him get to his feet!"

"It seems you have a good chance to win the playoffs. You have the league's top pitcher."

"No more. He quit."

"Trevor Kenny quit? Why?"

"I don't know, man. Tree just quit on us. The team is right sore. Maybe it's because his family left him. They're heading east right now. Real tough. My old lady left me a while back. It hurts big time."

"That's a shame. Do you think I could talk him out of it?"

"Why should you want to?"

"The league wouldn't be the same without Tree. Did he also quit as president of the league."

"Yes. The vice-president is taking over."

"And who is that?"

"Me!" Spike revealed his yellow teeth when he laughed. "Roo, go talk to Tree if you can find him. He's on vacation. He told us to leave him alone, but you talk some sense into him if you can."

"Does that mean he's out of town?"

"Nope. Tree has nowhere to go. Said he wanted to be alone. To lick his wounds, I guess. Suspect he's downing beer at his place or reeling in a couple of trout."

"Does he live far from here?"

"The other side of town. Go back towards customs and make a left just before you get there, at the gas station. He lives in a cabin exactly one mile from the turnoff. Do you know his truck?"

"A black pickup, isn't it?"

"Yea. F150. Shiny. He's fussy that way."

"One mile from the turnoff?"

"Yea. A cedar cabin on a small piece of property, right hand side, set in from the road a little. Name's on the mailbox. Can't miss it."

Roo casually returned to the parking lot, but once out of Spike's sight raced for his van and hurried back towards customs. He now sensed what Jeni sensed: Tree was in serious trouble.

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 3:15 p.m.

Tree's neck was getting kinked and he regretted not bringing a pillow, but there was no way he was going to dig himself out again. He put his folded jacket under his head and stared at the picture of Sally, Kay-Lyn and Brandon, turning the flashlight off intermittently to save the batteries, keeping their images in his mind. When the flashlight went dead and his beer was finished he would point his pistol upward and pull the trigger. And if claustrophobia brought on the dreaded flashbacks before that, he wouldn't hesitate to fire. Tree reckoned he would lose consciousness in less than two

minutes, and shortly after that he would be visiting his marine buddies in hell, if there really is such a place.

Tree thought about his only friend, Mac, who he first met in the marines when they were both still in their teens. Attracted to each other when they learned they were from the same city, Tree found Mac to be solid, tough, a man. And Tree was no flake himself. They got along good and became buds, in time adding Billy and Jesse, and then Pete and Greg to their inner circle. Tree lost four of his buds in a moment's time, and lost his fifth a short while later when Mac accepted Christ. Yes, they were still close, yes, they would each lay down his life for the other, but now they lived in two different worlds, looking at each other from separate shores. Mac ached for Tree to join him; Tree just wanted his friend to come back.

Then he went over the last game that cost the season championship. He smiled a little smile, thinking Mac undoubtedly beat the *Pirates* to make the playoffs, genuinely happy for the friend who once put himself at serious risk to save his life. And he thought of John Tanner, the broken leg, and the kid streaking across the infield to retrieve a loose bat. He still hadn't figured it out. "John, in the name of Jesus Christ, get to your feet." The words of Roo Tanner stayed with Tree ever since spoken.

Tree wanted his last thoughts to be on his family, and turned on the dimming flashlight to gaze a final time at the picture. It pained him to recall his boy's shoulder trembling under his hand. He could still feel his daughter's face pressed against his chest, and Sally's kiss on his cheek. "Sorry, guys," Tree apologized to the picture. He swallowed the last of the beer and reached for his gun..... when his cell chimed in his jeans pocket. *Should I answer it? One last contact with the world?*

"Tree here. Make it quick. I've got important business to tend to."

"Hey, man! How is it going? You beat the *Pirates,* I presume?"

"Really? What happened? Did your star performer run out of horseshoes?" "Really? What could be so urgent that he had to miss *this* game?"

"Tough break, man. But there's always next year."

"Yes, they're gone. Said our good-byes this morning. Real tough, but it's for the best. Life minus Tree is better than life with Tree."

"Yes, I'm doing okay. Right now I'm at my favorite fishing spot," he lied, "you know, I've brought you up here a few times. The river's running fast because of the rain. I got a couple of trout already." Tree had never lied to Mac, rarely lied to anyone, but he did it for his family.

"Thanks for the good wishes, but I quit the *Grizzlies."*

"You heard me, pal. Quit as in done, over and out, I'm out of here. Thought I would take some time to lick my wounds, catch lots of fish and down some extra beer."

"Yea, life can be the pits." Tree wished he could let his bud in on the irony.

"Yea, I know I'll get over it." Tree fiddled with his pistol. "Maybe sooner than one might think."

And then, "Hey Mac, I don't think I ever thanked you for saving my life way back when, such as it's worth. Thank you." Tree was sincere.

"Hey, didn't mean to embarrass you. It was just some nagging, unfinished business I put off for twenty-something years."

"Yea, sure, I would do the same for you. Hmmm. Or would I?" Tree wanted to get in the last dig. "Well, I don't have time to chat all day. And I'm sure you got some serious sorrowing to do."

"Okay. And thanks for the call."

The light was almost extinguished. All the beer was in his tummy. *No sense prolonging the agony. A man must do what a man must do*. He placed the jacket over his face, held the picture frame against the jacket with one hand, grabbed the pistol with the other, a couple of quick spins around his finger, exhaled, and fired into the safety glass.

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 3:45 p.m.

Mac had just finished talking to his bud, knowing he was having a worse day than himself, and now he was doing what Tree called "some serious sorrowing," leaning on his beloved pulpit, his silent but potent friend. He hesitated removing his *Challengers* uniform, knowing he wouldn't put in on again until the spring of next year..... if ever. Would there be a baseball team next year? The way things were going the most he could hope for is another last place finish, certain Roo and his son, and maybe a few other players, would no longer be part of the *Center.*

They had come *so close* to winning. They lost by *one* run, and he was certain they would have come from behind in the last inning for the win if the *Pirates* didn't play dishonestly. *Yes, they were within the rules,* Mac brooded, *but dirty ball nonetheless, ducking behind a technicality instead of facing their opponents men-to-men. Did we not show good faith by canceling our morning service, giving the* Pirates – *those scummy* Pirates - *a fair chance to get into the playoffs? Look how they showed their appreciation! And they call us Christians wimps! It's just not right!*

And then Mac's conscience kicked in. *What about me? Didn't I just do the same thing with Roo by ducking behind a technicality? Roo responded with integrity, and it was my place to honor that integrity by giving him the pulpit the following Sunday. Am I simply reaping what I have sowed? Ouch!*

Had Mac not been thoroughly angered at Roo, his conscience would have annoyed him for a while. *Roo cost us the game! It was simple revenge! A man who turns on his friends like that is not fit to get behind* any *pulpit!* Roo's betrayal canceled Mac's betrayal; his conscience was silenced.

Mac pounded the pulpit. *We came so close! So close!* And the "serious sorrowing" went on and on.

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 3:45 p.m.

The directions were simple and Roo had no trouble locating the mailbox marked *Tree Kenny, Inc.,* but was disappointed Tree's pickup was not in the driveway. *Maybe he's at a store or something,* Roo was thinking, *and will be back soon.* He was happy to have an excuse to be here should he return, to talk him out of quitting the team before the playoffs; that was better than, "My wife thought you were in trouble and I came down to check it out."

He called Shep out of the cab to stretch his legs. Walking towards the cabin he thought he heard a gunshot, like a pistol, but, funny, there was no echo. He also thought he saw the big box crate in the yard shift ever so slightly, but concluded that was impossible. He slowly strolled to the porch and knocked on the door even though all indication was against Tree being home.

I should have gotten Tree's cell number from Spike, he thought as he leaned against the crate. *Dumb! Maybe I should hustle back to the ball diamond before Spike leaves. I'll call Tree on his cell and ask him to meet me for a coffee.* He noticed tiny pieces of glass around the outside perimeter of the box, but none on the inside. Odd.

Shep was digging in the filled-in furrow, seemingly wanting to get inside the crate, so Roo pushed it aside to show him there was nothing there. But the dog started to dig frantically into the sod, which seemed to have been cut in strips, making a bit of a mess.

"No Shep! Stop digging! You can have a bone when you get home!" But Shep wouldn't stop until Roo pulled at his collar and sent him back to the van.

"Let's go back to the ball park, boy. We've got to hurry!"

Something wasn't right, Roo was thinking as he backed out of the driveway and sped back towards River's Bend - a big box in the middle of a well-kept yard..... glass along the outside edge..... a pistol shot with no echo..... Shep digging furiously. It just didn't make sense.

And then it did!

Roo slammed on the brakes, sending Shep flying off the seat onto the floor, put the van into reverse and gunned it, wheeling backwards down the road and into the driveway, over the lawn, braking inches from the crate. While he searched frantically for a shovel, Shep was back to digging with his paws.

"Look out, boy!" Roo lifted Shep aside and frantically worked the shovel at one end of what he now knew was Tree's grave.

"Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" was the only prayer he could think to pray, and he prayed it loudly. His shovel hit something, and he clawed at the dirt with his hands to expose two very large running shoes. "Wrong end!" he yelled, and began digging the opposite end. He calculated it had already been more than five minutes since he heard the gunshot.

"Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" he screamed. Mud from sweat and flying dirt marred his face and his *Challengers* uniform. Another minute passed before he uncovered and removed a *Grizzlies* jacket to see a picture frame and then Tree's deadly white face.

"Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" Roo continued to yell frantically as he pushed on Tree's chest, though he thought for sure he was moments too late. *If I only paid attention to Shep!* he accused himself.

Suddenly a big hand grabbed Roo's shirt, the other hand still buried, and a look of terror swept Tree's ashen face, his eyes bulging intensely. And then he went limp again, not breathing. With an enormous effort Roo pulled the partly buried body out of grave, plopped it on its back onto the lawn, and shook the lifeless body up and down, thumping Tree's back against the ground, pounding air into his lungs. Then *two* big hands grabbed Roo's shirt, the stark look of terror returned to the whitened face. But this time Tree did not fall back into unconsciousness.

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 4:15 p.m.

"Yes, Mom, we will all get on it right away."

"As a matter of fact, I don't have to tell them. Everyone has an ear close to the phone. Where are you?"

"It sounds like you are still a couple of hours from home. Dad phoned earlier. He couldn't get through to you on your cell. He said to tell you he got the prize, and wants to know if he should bring it home. He said you would know what he was talking about."

"Okay Mom, I will stay by the phone for your answer and relay it to Dad."

"No, it was real close, but we lost. I could tell Mr. Maclin was angry. Real angry. If Dad had been there we would have won."

"That's okay. Baseball isn't such a big deal to me any more."

"Love you, too, Mom."

"Love you, Mom!" the other kids yelled into the mouthpiece.

The kids were excited to have guests, and they were soon in the guest house cleaning from top to bottom.

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 4:40 p.m.

Sitting in a window booth in a roadside restaurant, Jeni was hesitant to bring up the subject. Food ordered, she took a deep breath. "There has been a development. Right now my husband is with Trevor in River's Bend. The Lord had told me that Reuben should go after him."

All three Kennys were attentive and silent.

"I have something very important to ask you. I know you have already been through a very trying day, but I must have an answer."

"What is it, Mrs. Tanner?" Kay-Lyn was tense.

"Mr. Tanner wants to bring your daddy home to the ranch."

"Jeni, no!" Sally exclaimed, blood rushing to her head.

"But Mrs. Tanner," Brandon spoke up, "you don't understand. Mom and Dad are divorced!"

"I know, Brandon." Jeni, too, was flush with emotion. "I am certain the Lord wants to put your family together again. Your dad would stay with us in the main house, that is, if he agreed to come. We would all have our meals together."

"We will all get hurt again!" Kay-Lyn exclaimed.

"I can't guarantee that won't happen," Jeni's reply was directed to the three. "I am going for a walk outside to give you a chance to talk it over. My husband and I will respect whatever decision you make."

CHAPTER TEN

sunday, june 10th, 2007, 4:40 p.m.

Sanity returned to Trevor Kenny slowly. For more than an hour the two men sat on the lawn, Roo's strong arm around Tree's quivering body, Shep at their feet recuperating from the excitement. Over and over Tree said, "Don't leave me, man!" and over and over Roo assured him, "I'm not going anywhere, friend." Tree used words like *hideous* and *freaky* and *weird* and *hairy* and *putrid* to describe the creatures he seen after passing from life to death. Or was it *near*-death? Or simply hallucinations? Never had Roo seen a man so overcome by dread and repulsion.

"Can you walk?"

"If you walk with me. Don't leave me, man!"

"I'm not going anywhere, friend."

And so they walked, up the road, down the road.

"You seem to be okay."

"Yeah, I'm okay. Don't leave me, man!"

"I'm not going anywhere, friend."

"I could use a beer."

"No beer."

"No beer?"

"No beer."

"Whatever you say, man."

"Should I take you to a hospital? Your doctor?"

"No hospital, man! No doctor! I feel like a fool."

Roo's cell chimed in his pocket. "Son! I can hardly hear you. Poor reception."

"Say again."

"Tell Mom I got the message."

"I said, tell..... Mom..... I..... got..... the message!"

"Yes, John, that is very kind of you."

"I said *kind!*

"Love you too, John. Sorry about the game."

"I said, I'm..... sorry..... you..... lost..... the game!"

"Yes, son. I'll be home later."

Tree was suddenly responsive. "You missed the game!"

"I came looking for you. My wife said you were in trouble, so I came looking."

"But you missed the big game! You're out of the playoffs!"

Roo could tell the distraction was bringing coherence back quickly, and he kept up the conversation. "Did you know the umpire called the game at the end of the eighth?"

"Yeah, Mac told me. Would you believe it? - he called me on my cell when I was in the grave just before I..... you know. He was some disappointed."

"We lost by one run."

"Yeah, they changed pitchers twice in the eighth inning just to kill time. That *Pirates* coach is a real jerk. Still, you would have won if you were there."

"But you're alive. That's what matters."

"But how did your wife, what's her name..... ?"

"Jeni."

"How did Jeni know?"

"God told her."

"But why would God tell her I was in trouble. We are bitter enemies."

"Not so, my friend. The Lord has always loved you."

"I can't get hold of such a thing."

"Do you want to?"

"Want to what?"

"Do you want to know if God loves you?"

"Well, yeah. If it's true!"

"If you want the truth, God will give you the truth."

"I want the truth, whatever it is!"

"Then ask God for it."

"How?"

"Just ask."

"Now?"

"Now."

Tree had no resistance left, not a smidgen. "God, give me the truth! Now!" Tree looked around for truth to drop out of the sky, not at all sure what it looked or felt like. "Don't see it. Don't feel it."

"It will come. Now let's make plans."

"Don't leave me, man!"

"I'm not going anywhere, friend."

"But you have to go home sometime."

"True. And you're coming with me."

"To Canada?"

"To our ranch in Bryden Falls."

"You sure? I mean, I can't say no because I couldn't stand being alone, but I don't want to be a drag."

"Sally and the kids are on the way to the ranch."

"No!!" Tree was totally disbelieving. "You're wrong, man! They're heading east right now!"

"Jeni went after them. They are all on the way home."

"Then I can't go! I swore I will never hurt them again!"

"God wants to restore your family."

"Can He do that?"

"He can."

"Do they want me, Roo, after all I've done?" His voice was unusually soft, hopeful.

"Jeni gave them the choice. They want you."

"But Sally and I are divorced!"

"They will stay in the guest house. You will have John's bedroom in our house."

"The shortstop?"

"The shortstop."

"Where will *he* sleep?"

"They will arrange something."

"His leg was really broken, wasn't it? I mean, I seen it!"

"It was broken. How long will it take you to clean up and pack?"

"Less than ten. Don't leave me, man!"

"I'm not going anywhere, friend."

"I could use a beer."

"No beer."

"No beer?

"No beer."

"Okay, man. Just don't leave me."

"I'm not going anywhere, friend."

Soon they were at the junction near customs, and Roo made a right-hand turn.

"Wrong way, man. Canada is to the left."

"Yes. But truth is to the right, in River's Bend."

"You're joking, right? I've lived there most of my life and I hadn't come across it."

"You'll see."

Twenty minutes later they were parked at a tired-looking shopping mall near a movie theater, *Play It Again.* Listed under a neon sign was Mel Gibson's *The Passion Of The Christ.*

"Want to go to a movie?" Roo pointed to a glossy advertisement.

"I heard about that movie. Brutally realistic."

"Yes, Jenny and I have seen it. I noticed it earlier when I was driving to the ball diamond, looking for you."

"Oh, I get it. This is the truth you said was in River's Bend. Cute."

"It is mostly accurate with the Bible. Now I know you have been through a lot. We don't have to go in. Your call."

"I *did* ask for truth."

"You did."

"What about the dog?"

"Shep can sleep in the back. That's his second bed."

"Can we get a hot dog and some popcorn? I'm starved."

On the way to Bryden Falls after the movie they did a lot of talking, *The Passion* having filled Tree with questions. As they drove home there was a wondrous display of thundering and lightning, bringing both a surreal backdrop for their spiritual discussion and an added risk of forest fires.

"But it's not right! They kept beating on Him! How could the people let that happen? He didn't do nothing wrong! Healing people and being nice isn't a crime! I just about walked out of there! Those idiots! I mean, it was plain *wrong!"*

"I know it's hard to comprehend, but you and I and everyone else crucified Christ!"

"No way, man! That happened a couple of thousands of years ago!"

"Let me explain." Roo shared the gospel message, starting with the sin of Adam, God's promise of a coming Savior to redeem mankind from the curse of sin, the role of satan intent on keeping men blind to the reality of the crucified Christ, the consequences of denying Christ, the many blessings attached to the person surrendering his life to the lordship of Christ, the eternal home of both the foolish who reject Christ and the wise who embrace Him. Tree listened intently.

It was early Sunday morning when the plumber's van approached the *Tanner Ranch* sign, and Roo

came to a stop.

“My friend, please hear me.”

“I’m listening, man.”

“This is our home. You are a welcomed guest. Jeni and I believe God would have you stay with us for one year. I will be close by. I will run my plumbing business from my home office. Only occasionally will I leave.

“I suggest you stay on the ranch for the entire year, leaving the property for emergencies only. Consider our home a refuge from the world you are used to, a place of restoration for you and your family.

“Adjustment may not be easy. For an entire year you will not drink alcohol, not a drop. You will come to see what a curse it has been. We live a different lifestyle than what you are accustomed to. I trust you will respect that lifestyle.

“One year from today you will drive under this sign in the other direction to make your own way once again. I predict by then your relationship with your wife and children will be healed, and you will leave together a strong family.”

“Thanks, man. This is all hard to believe. Is my family really here?”

“They are here, my friend. I suppose they are sleeping soundly. They have had a very long day.”

“But how will I pay my way? I’m no leech, man!”

“There is much work to do, but I don’t want you working for more than a couple of hours in a day. I want you to rest, go for walks, evaluate your life, plan your future.”

“Got it! But I will work enough to pay my keep. And my family’s.”

“I think they will cover themselves. The best thing you can do for your family is to become whole and healed.”

“Got it.” And then, “But please don’t tell Mac about this. Let me tell him. Maybe in a couple of days.” And then, “I’m scared, man.”

“Scared?”

“You know, facing my family again after just saying good-bye. And meeting your family.”

“It will be okay. Let’s go home!” And with that Roo drove up the road to the stately log house.

monday, june 11th, 2007, 1:30 a.m.

The bed was comfortable, the surroundings peaceful, but Trevor Kenny couldn’t sleep. It had been a

long day. This was the second night sleep refused to come, the previous he was kept awake by thoughts of the upcoming departure of his family and his plans of suicide.

And then the dreaded Sunday morning arrived, and he was in a zone of blurred unreality on his way to their meeting spot in the park. Reality cruelly swept away unreality when embracing his beloved ones for the final time, and his insides were cut into pieces. He could still see the gray family van in the rear view mirror, side door open awaiting Brandon standing alone and motionless, hanging on to his fishing shirt. Though his family was at this moment but a short stone's throw away, the pain of the good-bye was still burning.

And then he was in the grave of his own making, pistol in hand. He speculated the jacket over his head together with the picture frame created a small pocket of air that kept him alive an extra few minutes. He exhaled, as planned, before pulling the trigger, but instinctively filled his lungs at the last second. He remembered the sound of the gun, in that enclosure a loud blast, and then his inability to move even slightly under the crushing, smothering weight upon every inch of his body.

And then the demons came - filthy, laughing, ugly - to take him away to a world he knew would be as hideous as its ambassadors, never to return. Flashbacks of war were nothing to compare to the dark side of death, a creepy blend of hopelessness and insanity and remorse.

And then Reuben Tanner's face! - sweaty, dirty, anxious, but oh, so beautiful! Two worlds, one no less real than the other, were tugging at him, one to offer another chance, the other frantic to clinch his eternity. He fought unconsciousness with all his power, and when thoroughly fatigued fought even harder, energized by absolute desperation.

And then he was watching Jesus on a large screen, the one claiming to be the Son of God, the God he hated so many years. Jesus had won his heart. He was brave and decent and giving. *But being good didn't help Him one little bit! God watched - just watched! - His Son tortured in the cruelest manner. He could have done something! He could have rescued Jesus! It just wasn't fair!* The movie was, in part, the truth recently prayed for, a smarting truth, a truth threatening the might of ignorance.

And then the ride home in the thunder and lightning, and Reuben further explaining the gospel message of the movie. God wasn't being cruel, he was being loving! This had been planned for thousands of years.Finally the light went on: *He sent Jesus to die for me and Sally and Kay-Lyn and Brandon, the only One* able *to pay for our sins.* The discovery that God was nice was disconcerting.

Tree refused to let the darkness in by turning off the light though he was surrounded by gestures of love. The most obvious love-token was John's bed and bedroom complete with an en suite bathroom, an addition John had built for himself, by himself, Roo had said. For an entire year John was giving up his room! There were vases of flowers and notes of welcome from each of the children. There were balloons hanging from the ceiling, a teddy bear on the pillow, a glass of water beside the bed, a *Jesus-Loves-You* sticker on the dresser mirror.

In a few hours he would face his family at the breakfast table. Would he simply sit down without a word, perhaps a, *Good morning, everyone?* Or would he take his family in his huge arms and tell them how sorry he was, and how things would be different from now on?

But would it really be different? Could he really change the way he was? He tried before, told them many times, *Things will be different from now on,* and failed miserably. *What makes me think I can change now?*

monday, june 11th, 2007, 1:50 a.m

After kissing his sleeping Jeni on the cheek to let her know he was safely home Roo retreated to his office. His long day wasn't over yet. He had serious cares to be cast at the feet of Jesus. Because of his absence the *Challengers* missed the playoffs..... again.

Because of his preaching there probably would be no more *Challengers*, not ever. And that's not all.

He and Jeni had always protected their children from unhealthy influences, and provided an environment ideal for raising kids. His children were stable, able, and mature. But now he had brought worldly influences into their refuge. He was the head of the family under Christ; had he placed the family he was responsible to protect in jeopardy?

The fact is, Roo fearfully reasoned, Sally has rejected Christ, *their* Christ, all of her life. True, she didn't really understand, but that was only because her life was spent resisting the wooing of the Spirit at work in the hearts of everyone. And Sally's children? If they were typical, they had fed on violence and betrayal and lust from television and electronic games most days of their lives. Whose children would influence whose? If the influence were mutual his kids would still be damaged.

And Tree. He had committed his home to Tree for one year. One full year Tree would sit at their table, connect with his children, be influential. Sure, Tree has been humbled, completely so, but how long before the swagger, the arrogance, the cynicism would return? Would the chaos of his broken life raze the peace of their home? Would the man who brought grief to his own family for many years now bring grief to the Tanner family? Would his children one day have to endure the sight of Mr. Kenny suffering through flashbacks?

Roo had stayed home from work since Jeni suggested it, but what was to be very temporary must now be extended to a year; no way was he going to leave the ranch unattended more than an occasional few hours. Long ago Roo stopped working Fridays so he could pursue the Lord more fully. Soon that wasn't enough to satisfy his increasing hunger for more of Jesus, so in faith he added a fourth day, Monday, to his off days. Yes, the Lord always provided. The ranch produced some income through boarding horses and selling beef and hay, and the garden increased in size every year making them less dependent on the grocery store, while fall and winter hunting always kept their freezers supplied. But now he must make serious adjustments to run his business entirely from home, leaning more on his hired help to give estimates and make appointments. Will it work?

Roo would never have invited a family to live with them had he not the conviction this was a commission from the Lord. But he had been wrong before. Because of his defective discernment a church had been split in two, perhaps beyond recovery.

Roo's thoughts were interrupted by a light tapping at the doorway.

"Roo. Sorry to bother you, man. I couldn't sleep. I've been thinking lots …… thinking I should be dead …… I came so close, but God gave me another chance, and I don't want to blow it, you know what I mean?"

Roo said nothing.

"So I was thinking, I could die tomorrow and I know where I would go, you know what I mean? Man, that was a scary place!…… Maybe there's a better way…… for me and my family…… Maybe God isn't so bad after all….. And I was thinking …… maybe, you know …… "

Roo said nothing.

"Well, maybe I could live for…… maybe I could have…… you know…… JESUS!!"
And at the name of *Jesus* the big man broke down in uncontrollable sobs, and tears that refused to come since a teen flowed freely onto his bushy walrus mustache.

tuesday, june 12th, 2007, 1:15 p.m.

Vivian was packing her husband's suitcase when she got the call.

"The Maclin residence."

"No, I'm sorry, he is not here. Would you like to leave a message?"

"Yes, officer. I expect him home shortly. He has to be at the airport in River's Bend in two hours."

"Yes, I am his wife."

"He will return Wednesday afternoon."

"An important message?"

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, no!"

"Are you sure?"

"Are they still searching for the body?"

"Yes, Trevor Kenny is Terry's closest friend."

"Yes, he is the pastor of our church."

"Yes, I am sure he would want to direct the memorial."

"Friday? Do you know the time and location?"

"Is there a number he could reach you?"

"You can expect to hear from him soon to confirm."

tuesday, june 12th, 2007, 7:00 p.m.

The first thing Mac did when entering his hotel room was unplug the idiot box. How tempting to just veg on a movie or watch a couple of his favorite sitcoms to numb the anxiety and pain.

Mac was so shaken after Vivian told him about Tree's drowning he almost canceled his flight. Funny, as horrible the news was, he was distracted by her genuine compassion, and he wished the return of the young lady he had married, so considerate, so giving, so earnest, so real.

The fishing/hunting lodge had been evacuated, Vivian related the state troopers report, a precaution against nearby forest fires; otherwise Tree's black F150, now the only vehicle in the parking area, would never had been noticed. A forest warden went looking for Tree to convey the evacuation order only to find his rod and jacket on a precarious slope. All evidence pointed to death by drowning. The fact his body was not yet found in the raging river was to be expected; perhaps one day it would be spotted in a down-river lake. The trooper got Mac's name from one of the *Grizzlies,* and wanted to know if he would perform a memorial service. No one knew how to get in touch with Sally, probably still on her way to some unknown city in the east. Perhaps it's best that way.

For now Mac must stay focused on business at hand. He must go through with this, his appointment with Mr. Big, his future and that of his family was at stake. Grieving could wait until after his 10:00 a.m. appointment. He must not show fear during the meeting, he cautioned himself; fear is not becoming of an assistant superintendent. And yet he must reveal appropriate humility. He must be as the errant son appealing to father for forgiveness. He would not mention the circumstances by which Tanner did not, and would never, preach the second half of his message, but simply state it wasn't going to happen. He will invite Brother Johnston to be the main speaker at the weekend meetings he intended to hold at the *Center* - everyone loves an invite to preach - and ask his advice on how to program the meetings - everyone likes to be consulted. This should be a piece of cake.

Unpacking his suitcase he noticed an envelope he didn't put there. The happy-face told him it was his Katie. *What's this?* Inside the envelope was a cd, marked, *My Pastor-Daddy.* And a portable player. *My precious baby! How touching!* Tomorrow he would listen to the cd. Tomorrow he would grieve for his bud. Tonight he would prepare for, and pray for, the success of tomorrow's meeting.

wednesday, june 13th, 2007, 9:56 a.m.

The name on the nameplate read *Margaret Tilton. A cookie-cutter replica of Vivian,* Mac thought as he

observed the secretary behind her desk, meticulous in dress and manner, her coordinating blue slacks and blouse the only warm colors in the rather dark reception room. *Hmmm. Maybe Vivian plus two or three years,* he guessed. *Dutiful and competent,* his first impression. *Will Vivian one day be seated in her chair?*

Superintendent Johnston's secretary was warm and apologetic, yet maintained her poise. "I am sorry, Brother Maclin. Brother Johnston is still out of town. He was expected back early this morning but he phoned to say there was a flight cancellation, apparently a problem was discovered in the navigational controls. He expects to fly in this afternoon but will not be able to meet with you until tomorrow morning."

What could Mac say? "Those things happen."

"Had I known where you were staying I would have tried to reach you by phone."

"Thank you for your consideration." Mac did his best to respond to her professionalism with professionalism, sufficiently warm and no more.

"Brother Johnston asked me to extend his sincere apologies, and to tell you he is looking forward to seeing you. Also, he said to tell you the denomination would cover your added expenses."

"What would be a good time in the morning?"

"How about the same time, 10 a.m.?"

"I'll be here."

Back in his room Mac went over the secretary's words. *Hmmm. Sincere apologies. Looking forward to seeing you.* Positive indications of a sympathetic superintendent, for sure. Best of all was the gesture of paying the extra expenses of another day in a very expensive city. Mac was much encouraged, even cheerful, until.....

Until he thought of his bud, his body sunken or floating somewhere in a river or lake. And where was his spirit? Try as he might, he could not think of Tree making a last minute decision for Christ. Mac was certain: Tree was in hell.

Hell. Mac had always had a problem with hell. Could it really, really be true? Is it really a place of eternal anguish? Or is it simply the absence of love, as some would say? Mac concluded since the world he could see was a hell to multitudes, the real hell he couldn't see, the hell Christ came to rescue us from, must be a hellish place indeed. Whatever hell is, Tree was there, and he would be there forever.

And Mac blamed himself. He called Tree his best friend yet rarely had time for him. And though he always intended to pray for him, he seldom did. *Oh, if I just had one more chance, I would grab that guy by the throat and* insist *he become a Christian!*

Click! Mac pushed play on the portable cd player to escape his anguish.

"Hi Daddy, this is your Pigtails. I know you wanted to talk at *Mario's,* but that didn't happen. I think you would like to know where your little girl is at. Am I right?

"Before telling you where I *am,* I must tell you where I *was,* not very long ago. Though I smiled and bounced and kidded a lot, your little girl was not a happy teen. You see, I had lost something very dear to me. And funny, I didn't realize I lost it. It was gone, but I didn't know it was gone, though the loss caused me much sorrow.

"And then I found it! Well, not *it,* but *Him.* I found Christ! Or should I say, *re*-found Christ? Thanks to Mr. Tanner, that is, thanks to Mr. Tanner's courage and obedience, I realized what was missing in my life. It was Jesus!

"Don't you remember, Daddy, how happy I used to be? I mean real happiness, not the imitation happiness I put on when around people. How did I lose it, Pastor Daddy?

"So that's where your Pigtails is at, with Jesus. And that's where I will stay the rest of my life. No matter what the cost, I will follow the One who forgave my selfishness and manipulation.

"And I was wondering, Daddy, what was it like before? - you know, when you and Mom first moved to Bryden Falls, when you were not much older than me and Kyle. So I went to the tape collection in the rec room and started listening to my preacher-daddy of years ago, before I was old enough to remember. I put together a compilation of excerpts of some of your sermons. Are you ready for this?"

Click! Katie was the sunshine of his life. To have the happy one in the family, in the congregation, speak of her sadness was most disheartening, to be added to the sorrow of losing his only friend.

After a few minutes of painful assimilation, *Click!* Though the cd was somewhat garbled, Mac could recognize his own voice, a younger, more fiery voice.

"People, we must never lose sight of Christ! He must be the Alpha and the Omega in our lives, our passion and our purpose, our object of worship ……"

"Let us never slip from relationship to religion, as so many before us. Let us ever be mindful of the enemy of our souls who would distract us from our true purpose, to know, to become intimately acquainted with, Jesus Christ our Lord …… "

"Before us all is the judgment seat of Christ where we must each give an account to Him who judges righteously. Our works must be the outflow of intimacy with the King of kings and the Lord of lords! …… "

"We are to live our lives *with* Him, *through* Him, *in* Him! Never try to approach the Father except through Jesus …… "

"When we stop gathering in the name of Jesus, when He has become a forgotten First Love, when we have fallen from relationship to a form of religion, when tears stop flowing at the mention of His lovely name, when we stop expecting Jesus to presence Himself in our midst, I say it is time to stay home! I for one refuse to play church! ……"

Click! Where did that *Mac go?* Mac wanted to know. And, *Where did my Vivian go?* He remembered his young wife, a flame for Christ, boldly approaching strangers on the street, ever ready to proclaim the Love of her life.

Click!

"Jesus told us plainly, 'Without Me you can do nothing.' Nothing means *nothing!* Yes, we can be active, we can maintain an *appearance* of healthy Christianity, but without an intimate and passionate relationship with our Sin-bearer the fruit of all our exercise will be of no value …… "

Click! Who could be phoning now? Mac's emotions were being tossed around, and they were about to get bounced some more.

"Hello!" he demanded.

"Is this some kind of a sick joke?"

"Tree!! Is it really you?! You're supposed to be dead and gone to hell!"

"Well how did you know I was here? Where are you?"

"What are you doing at the Tanner ranch? I didn't know you were friends!"

"Sally and the kids are there?! I don't understand. They are supposed to be back east!"

"Do you mean to tell me that's where Reuben was Sunday morning? I thought …… oh, never mind."

"What kind of trouble were you in? I was talking to you Sunday afternoon. It sounded like you were having a great time reeling in trout."

"What do you mean you were talking to me from your grave? Come on, Tree, make sense, will you!"

"And how did I save your life?"

"Well, I'm not so sure I understand. You say if I hadn't phoned, you would have pulled the trigger a few minutes earlier and you would be in hell now. Were you about to shoot your brains out? Sounds messy."

"So now you believe in hell. You wouldn't listen to me, would you?! How many times have I told you? --- *there's a heaven to gain and a hell to shun.* But no! Tree has to find out for himself!"

"You're darn right I'm mad! How many best friends do you think I've got? I love you, you big jerk!"

"No, I don't want to hear any more news! I'm having a very rough day."

"No!" Mac's voice softened to a whisper.

"Tree, you wouldn't kid old Mac, would you, bud?"

"Tree! That's great! Welcome into the kingdom of God, my brother in Christ. Tell me about it."

"Sally told you what?"

"I don't remember asking Roo and Jeni to pray for you."

"Oh, fifteen years ago. Now let me see if I've got this right. Reuben and Jeni Tanner have been praying for you every day for the past fifteen years? Unbelievable! You know, I do remember now. Yes, I gave them your picture and asked them to pray. But I didn't expect them to pray for fifteen years!"

"How long will you be staying at the Tanners?"

"A year! And Sally and the kids?"

"Wow! Yes, I am sure God will put your family together."

"Now I want you to start all over. Tell me again all that happened. Slowly now. Step by step."

"No, pal, I won't tell anyone about the suicide."

"You're right. Real dumb. Now start from the beginning."

thursday, june 14th, 2007, 2:30 a.m.

Mac woke from a fitful sleep, the voices of many ricocheting throughout his conscience.

I know I'm just a kid but I, like, thought you might like to know that Mr. Tanner, well, he, like, helped me in my walk with Jesus, you know..... he, like, helped me in my walk with Jesus, you know..... he, like, helped me in my walk with Jesus, you know.....

To me, it is out of square; it is not right. It is off plumb with the Bible and therefore my conscience. I can't live with it. I resign from the board of elders..... I resign from the board of elders..... I resign from the board of elders.....

In my opinion, my friends, most of your works are wood, hay, and straw. They will be consumed by fire..... They will be consumed by fire..... They will be consumed by fire.....

I am a licensed and ordained minister of our denomination, and as such have agreed to abide by denominational bylaws and policies..... have agreed to abide by denominational bylaws and policies..... have agreed to abide by denominational bylaws and policies.....

Leaders are the spokesmen, the teachers. It is hard to overstate the power of the pulpit, and since we

control the pulpit we must accept the responsibility of the welfare of the assembly..... we must accept the responsibility of the welfare of the assembly..... we must accept the responsibility of the welfare of the assembly.....

I'm saved, Mac! I'm a different person! I can feel it inside me! The hate and fear and loneliness, it's all gone! I got Jesus!..... I got Jesus!..... I got Jesus!.....

Christ once reigned in your heart, but you have distanced yourself from your First Love..... you have distanced yourself from your First Love..... you have distanced yourself from your First Love.....

Message number seven. Hi Pastor Mac, I would sure like to talk to you face to face and have you level with me. Am I really unprepared to give an account to Christ? I attend this church because I thought we were doing so well..... I thought we were doing so well..... I thought we were doing so well.....

I know, Pastor. I guess everybody thought I was a Christian. But I always knew something was missing, you know? Like, I was empty inside..... Like, I was empty inside..... Like, I was empty inside.....

The only time we can play the Pirates *is Sunday morning. That means canceling the service. So it's your call, pal..... it's your call, pal..... it's your call, pal.....*

It is imperative that you turn back to Christ..... turn back to Christ..... turn back to Christ.....

Don't you remember, Daddy, how happy I used to be? I mean real happiness, not the imitation happiness I put on when around others. How did I lose it, Pastor Daddy?..... How did I lose it, Pastor Daddy?..... How did I lose it, Pastor Daddy?.....

Without an intimate and passionate relationship with our Sin-bearer the fruit of all our exercise will be of no value..... the fruit of all our exercise will be of no value..... the fruit of all our exercise will be of no value.....

Tossing and turning wouldn't quiet the thoughts. After pressing the rewind button he listened again to his Pigtails. "Before telling you where I am, I must tell you where I was, not very long ago. Though I smiled and bounced and kidded a lot, your little girl was not a happy teen. You see, I had lost something very dear to me. And funny, I didn't realize I lost it. It was gone but I didn't know it was gone, though the loss caused me much sorrow."

Click!

How could it be? Mac marveled. *How could someone become distanced from Christ and not know it?* And then he thought of Vivian. *Did she lose it, too?* After comparing the old Vivian and the new Vivian, *Yes,* he was forced to conclude, *she lost it too.* And then he marveled at himself, how over all these years he couldn't see what was now so obvious.

And Kyle? Yes, Kyle as well. This was getting excruciating.

And the congregation? One by one he considered them. He couldn't understand how he could love

so many so dearly, but he did. And he had to admit that which would be difficult for any shepherd to admit: most under his watch had lost their fervor for Christ.

But why? How could it have happened?

And then he asked himself, *And me?*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

thursday, june 14th, 2007, 10:01 a.m.

Margaret Tilton had hoped Terry Maclin would arrive a few minutes before ten so she would have an opportunity to converse with him; it would be considered an act of courtesy to interrupt her work for his sake though *she* was the curious one. Did he have children? How old? Did he enjoy living in Canada? Does he miss the States? Yesterday she was impressed with the solid stature, uncommon in this office, in the dark grey suit who would soon be the assistant superintendent, her number two boss. Was he as polished as he seemed? He certainly didn't lack professional flair. *Hmmm. Forty? Forty-two?*

She was disappointed Brother Maclin was a minute late, and his attire today surprisingly casual. Brother Johnston came out of his office to greet him with a brotherly embrace.

"Terry! God bless you!"

"And you, Martin!"

"Well, yes, yes! Come in."

Margaret observed the meeting was becoming rather lengthy, forty-five minutes having passed, and the two had not yet emerged from the office. And then the indicator light on her phone blinked.

"Yes, Brother Johnston."

"Yes, Brother Grover is in town. He has an 11:15 at the Bible college."

"Yes, sir. Right away."

The phone rang a number of times before Mrs. Grover answered.

"Good day, Mrs. Grover. Margaret Tilton."

"I am well, thank you. Is Brother Grover available?"

"I see."

"No, I have his cell number. Thank you."

"Hello, Brother Grover. Margaret Tilton. Brother Johnston requests you to join him here in a meeting

with Terry Maclin from Canada."

"Yes, I told him about your appointment. But it seems he wants you here."
"Thank you, Brother Grover." And then, "Brother Johnston, Brother Grover is on his way."

"Yes, sir, I will cancel your 11 a.m. and your 12."

Fifteen minutes later, "Good morning, Margaret."

"Good morning, Brother Grover. Please, just walk in."

thursday, june 14th, 2007, 4:00 p.m.

Ring!

"Bryden Falls Community Christian Center, Pastor Phil Ferguson speaking."

"Mac! How are you?"

"Never better, eh? The meeting went well then?"

"You got to see both the super and his assistant. Great! I've been praying for you. Where are you phoning from?"

"So you will soon be boarding? Sounds like you will be in River's Bend in two hours and home in less than four."

"No problem. I'll start phoning right away."

"Got it. Friday evening 7:00 p.m."

"Got it. It's important everyone is there."

"Got it. You are bringing two guests for the meeting. I'll pass on that information."

"Sure I can meet with you tomorrow, Mac. I am free at noon. How about lunch?"

"Great! Can you pick me up?"

"Great! Look forward to seeing you."

"Yes, I've been managing. Lots of calls, people wanting to know if Tanner will be speaking on Sunday. I assured them he will not. I was surprised some were disappointed."

"Okay then, I'll see you tomorrow noon if not sooner. Have a safe trip."

"Love you, too, Mac."

And then, "Mrs. Williamson. Pastor Phil."

"Oh, just great, thank you. It's been a bit hectic, but Pastor Mac and Vivian will be back at work next

week. Say, is Donald home?"

"Donald. Pastor Phil. Pastor Mac asked me to relay a message to the elders. He is hoping you can be all be at the *Center* Friday at 7:00 p.m."

"Any chance of you canceling? He says it's important you all be there."

"I understand. He said if anyone can't be there he will personally phone when he gets in."

"Yes, sounds real important. He says he invited two guests to be there."

"No, I didn't ask, actually. He was meeting with both the superintendent and his assistant."

"Well, that might be a fair assumption. Who else could it be? He says it is a most important meeting."

"Oh, you think you can cancel? Great, Donald! See you Friday at seven." And then, "Hello, Mrs. Edwards. Pastor Phil."

"Oh, just great, thank you. It's been a bit hectic, but Pastor Mac and Vivian will be back at work next week. Say is Shaun home?"

friday, june 15th, 2007, 6:55 p.m.

The elders assembled in the boardroom could hear the muffled voices of Mac and the two guests behind the closed folding door separating the boardroom from Mac's office. Anticipating Superintendent Johnston and Assistant Superintendent Grover, the elders were more animated than usual, fidgety, a bit giddy. Two chairs had been placed at the far end of the table, a spot reserved for special guests. Donald Williamson was pumped for the occasion; he had been determined to block Tanner from the pulpit, and was enjoying his victory. David Tomas and Sheldon Waters were bracing themselves so as not to be unduly influenced by the dignitaries, but both felt themselves caving even before their entry. Nelson Chesney and Brent Anderson had the butterflies, and hoped they wouldn't embarrass themselves by saying something stupid, or by saying something intelligent stupidly. Sheldon Waters, usually controlled, fiddled with his pen, cleaned his glasses, adjusted his watch. And then the folding doors were flung open to reveal the guests.

Reuben Tanner and Tony Borric.

"Gentlemen, I trust everybody knows everybody," Mac said matter-of-factly while escorting his two guests to the end of the table. After pausing a full minute to allow everyone to regain equilibrium, he continued. "I want to thank everybody for coming on such short notice. I especially want to thank my guests, Reuben and Tony, for honoring us with their presence. They will be here for a short time only." He handed a piece of paper to Sheldon listing the order of business and asked him to chair, as usual.

Sheldon Waters: Be happy to, Pastor. Nelson, please open in prayer.

Nelson Chesney: Father, we ask that You preside over this meeting. Your will be done. In Jesus' name, amen.

Everyone: Amen!

Sheldon Waters: I want to welcome our guests, our surprise guests, this evening.

Most: Yes. Welcome.

Sheldon Waters: We have extensively discussed Reuben Tanner. He is here now to answer any questions we might have. Anyone?

Donald Williamson: Tanner, I've been watching most baseball games for several years now and you were always behind the plate. On the most important game of the year, any year, you were conspicuously absent. It seems so obvious this was done to spite the baseball team and the entire congregation.

Brent Anderson: We would certainly have won the game if you were there, Reuben. The congregation has always faithfully supported the *Challengers,* and was hoping for a playoff spot after all these years. It seems you put your interests and your feelings before everybody else.

Reuben Tanner: I can only say I had urgent business to attend to.

Donald Williamson: Yes, I heard about the "pressing matter." Odd that a *pressing matter* never stopped you before.

Terry Maclin: Brothers, a little while ago I shared your sentiments, and I was probably the one angriest with Roo. But now I can verify from firsthand information Reuben did, in fact, have a crucial matter to attend to.

Donald Williamson: Tanner, since you appealed to us to overthrow Pastor Mac's decision to refuse you the pulpit, we have been disrupted as never before. One elder even shirked his responsibility by quitting before his term was up. And as a direct result of your *dissertation* to the congregation, the church is split in two. Tell me Tanner, why are you here? If you come to ask our forgiveness I, for one, will forgive and forget.

David Tomas: Tony, Mr. Williamson does not speak for all of us. Notice no one has opened the Bible since you closed it.

Sheldon Waters: I think we owe an explanation to Reuben. Tony resigned because he felt we were choosing the policies of our denomination over the Bible. Before leaving, he shut the Bible, obviously because he felt we were making a mockery by leaving it open, an open Bible indicating that we honor and obey it. Have I got that right, Tony?

Tony Borric: You speak correctly.

Reuben Tanner: May I respond to Donald's question?

Sheldon Waters: Certainly.

Reuben Tanner: I felt the Lord wanted me to speak to the congregation. I was surprised and disturbed at the widespread reaction. Mac gave me a book to read, a book that suggested I might have been mistaken. At this moment I am confused. Perhaps I made a serious mistake.

Donald Williamson: Perhaps?! Perhaps?! Just look around you, man! People are confused, shaken!

Nelson Chesney: Reuben, our very witness to the community is threatened! What happens to our reputation when the news gets out? Since your message to our people, we are falling apart internally.

Tony Borric: May I speak on Reuben's behalf?

Sheldon Waters: Certainly.

Tony Borric: Since my resignation, and since Reuben's message, I have diligently sought the Lord on behalf of the congregation. I believe the Lord has revealed to me that *Bryden Falls Community Christian Center* is not as spiritually healthy as we seem to think, and He wants to bring renewal. I believe He has spoken to us through Reuben Tanner.

Donald Williamson: Tony, that's preposterous!

Shaun Edwards: Let the man speak!

Tony Borric: Tell me, Donald, who do you think caused the split in our church?

Donald Williamson: That's obvious! Tanner!

Tony Borric: I disagree.

Donald Williamson: Well, who then?

Tony Borric: The Holy Spirit.

Nelson Chesney: Tony, that's insane! The Holy Spirit doesn't divide, He unites!

Tony Borric: Does He? Shaun?

Shaun Edwards: I believe Tony is right. Whenever Jesus spoke, it seems, He brought division. And Jesus was, while on earth, dependent on the Holy Spirit for direction.

David Tomas: Has there ever been a visitation of the Holy Spirit that did not bring division? History indicates revival *always* causes division.

Shaun Edwards: Jesus said, "I did not come to bring peace but a sword."

Donald Williamson: I utterly reject such nonsense! We can look at the Trinity and see God is a God of perfect unity!

Shaun Edwards: The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are united in *truth.* It seems to me when we chose, as a board, to accept denominational policy over the Bible, we turned our back on truth, and went another direction.

Donald Williamson: It's not another direction! We have always gone this way!

Tony Borric: I believe the Holy Spirit wants to change that. He wants His people aligned with truth. An assembly not built upon the truths of the Bible can never be spiritually healthy.

David Tomas: I have something to say to Reuben Tanner.

Sheldon Waters: Speak.

David Tomas: Thank you, Reuben! It took real guts to do what you did.

Shaun Edwards: Yes, Reuben, thank you!

Brent Anderson: Man, am I confused!

Donald Williamson: Well, Brent, some here would say you are supposed to blame the Holy Spirit for that!

Brent Anderson: Reuben, I understand some of our congregation were considering attending your Wednesday gathering at your residence. Tell me, did that happen?

Reuben Tanner: Eight people from the *Center* attended last Wednesday.

Brent Anderson: Eight people! Did you discourage them from attending in the future?

Reuben Tanner: I did not.

Brent Anderson: Would you consider relocating your Wednesday gathering to the *Center,* and bring it under the authority of the *Center?*

Reuben Tanner: No.

Donald Williamson: How do you feel about that Tanner? - Pastor Mac trusted you with the pulpit and you steal some of his sheep. Frankly, you don't seem to be a man who can be trusted.

Shaun Edwards: Let's assess the matter. Reuben obviously feels the *Center* is not doing well spiritually. Could we really expect him to bring his group under our authority?

David Tomas: I think it would be fair to ask, what spiritual authority do we think we have?

Brent Anderson: We are under the authority of the denomination.

David Tomas: And whose authority are they under?

Brent Anderson: God's authority!

David Tomas: Isn't God's authority His Word, the Bible we have decided to abandon? Could it be that God speaks a *different* word to headquarters?

Sheldon Waters: I think we better hear from Shaun.

Shaun Edwards: David is right. If we believe God's Word is His authority, then we must conclude that only those who speak God's Word are speaking authoritatively.

Donald Williamson: Nonsense! We are all to be under someone's authority! The Israelites were under Moses' authority! The early church was under the authority of Christ's apostles! Down through the ages there has always been an order of authority!

Shaun Edwards: My response to you, Donald, is that no one has authority to alter or add to God's Word. The authority of Moses, the authority of the apostles, the authority of church leaders throughout the history of the church was limited to speaking the Word. If they spoke another Word, God would not have his people obey.

Sheldon Waters: While all this is most interesting, I think we should move on to the next order of business. Pastor Mac?

Terry Maclin: My brothers I have a request to make. I made a mistake, another mistake, and now I need your help.

Sheldon Waters: We are listening, Pastor.

Terry Maclin: We had a good chance to win the game against the *Pirates* Sunday. We needed one run to tie, two to win, going into the ninth. We were facing the weakest links in their batting line-up; they would be facing our strongest. They took advantage of a technicality and the game was theirs, this they did even though they were well aware we didn't have to play them. Had we not canceled our Sunday service we would have automatically made the playoffs. It seemed so unfair. And then I remembered I did the same thing.

Sheldon Waters: The same thing, Pastor? What do you mean?

Terry Maclin: I gave Reuben my word he could speak two successive Sundays. I let him make the decision to cancel the service or not cancel. Reuben did the honorable thing, and gave the *Pirates* a fair chance. I seized the opportunity to get out of the commitment I made to Reuben. I should have offered him the pulpit the following Sunday, this coming Sunday, though on a technicality I was not obliged. He did what was right and honorable; I did not.

Donald Williamson: Pastor, *surely* you are not asking us to give the pulpit to Tanner again!

Terry Maclin: Donald, that is *exactly* what I am requesting. I listened to Roo's tape a second time. He did not, in my opinion, say anything scripturally unsound. As a matter of fact, his preaching reminds me of my own preaching many years ago.

Sheldon Waters: This is the second time we have been shocked in the past few minutes. Brent and Nelson, let's hear from you.

Brent Anderson: I am surprised and more than a little upset by the request. I must say, however, I thought the *Pirates* played dirty ball on Sunday. If we deny Reuben the pulpit because he did what was honorable, we would also be playing dirty ball.

Nelson Chesney: I really want to say no to the request, but I cannot in good conscience. We gave Pastor Mac our word we would support him in whatever decision he made; we are still obligated to keep our word.

Sheldon Waters: Shaun? David? Donald? What's your judgment?

Shaun Edwards: I look forward to hearing my brother Reuben Tanner on Sunday morning.

David Tomas: Ditto. I want to hear how we can draw closer to Jesus Christ.

Donald Williamson: I think everyone knows my position.

Sheldon Waters: Like Nelson, I hate to say yes, but cannot say no. Well, Pastor, it's not quite unanimous but you have our support.

Terry Maclin: Thank you, brothers. Reuben, would you please preach the second half of your message on Sunday?

Reuben Tanner: I will.

Terry Maclin: I encourage you to freely share your insights. Don't hold back.

Reuben Tanner: I hear you.

Terry Maclin: And Reuben, would you accept my sincere apologies?

Reuben Tanner: You know the answer, Mac.

Donald Williamson: It's *Pastor* Mac, Tanner!

Sheldon Waters: Now it says here, Pastor Mac has two announcements to make. Go ahead, Pastor.

Terry Maclin: Thank you. On Thursday morning, at 4:05 to be exact, I recommitted my life to Christ.

Reuben Tanner: Mac! That's wonderful!

Sheldon Waters: I'm amazed! Go on, Pastor.

Terry Maclin: By a series of events I came to realize I was backslidden. I had departed from Jesus Christ. No, not entirely, but I was far from where I once was, relationally speaking. It was hard for me to see it, being the proud spiritual leader.

Nelson Chesney: What? You, Pastor Mac?!

Donald Williamson: In all due respect, Pastor, couldn't you rephrase that? Perhaps *backslidden* is an overstatement.

Brent Anderson: Surely you are not serious, Pastor Mac! I have always looked up to you as my mentor!

Terry Maclin: I am serious, Brent. In part, I blame the pulpit for that. I was negatively affected by the constant attention and admiration from the congregation. I got puffed up, so slowly as to be imperceptible. I began to believe I was someone above the ordinary.

Brent Anderson: But Pastor, you *are* above the ordinary! That's why you are the pastor!

Terry Maclin: Brent, if you were behind the pulpit as much as I have been, you too would be looked upon as someone special. The pulpit does that. At the conference I warned other ministers of what I term *Pulpit Power,* the power of the pulpit for good and for harm, but could not see I myself had been ill affected.

Brent Anderson: Are you saying the pulpit is harmful to every minister?

Terry Maclin: I wouldn't say *every,* but certainly *most.* Brent, try to picture yourself being listened to by a large group of impressionable people Sunday after Sunday, year after year. Add to that someone calling you *Pastor* Brent a number of times throughout the day. Don't you think it might go to your head? Would you not begin to see yourself as someone more spiritual, more special, more gifted with wisdom than the rest?

Brent Anderson: I see your point, Pastor.

Sheldon Waters: Thank you for your insights, Pastor Mac. You said you have a second announcement?

Terry Maclin: I do. I wish to inform the board I resign as pastor of *Bryden Falls Community Christian Center,* effective immediately.

Everyone: No! No, Pastor Mac! But why?

Terry Maclin: Hear me, brothers. When I recommitted my life to Christ yesterday, I also committed myself to obedience to the Bible. I pledged obedience to His Word as the Holy Spirit reveals truths of the Bible to me. I even signed the last page of the Bible as a declaration to the Father, His Son Jesus and the Holy Spirit. I think we have already agreed many denominational practices are not biblical. Actually, I have come to realize *most* of the ways we do things are contrary to Scripture. I

cannot be the pastor of this church, any church I know of, and keep my commitment to the Bible. I therefore must resign.

Nelson Chesney: But pastor, the *Center* needs you! *I* need you!

Terry Maclin: Believe me Nelson, you don't need me.

David Tomas: You cannot blame yourself for the spiritual condition of the church. We are each free moral agents.

Terry Maclin: Yes, David, we are free moral agents, and everyone is responsible for his/her spiritual condition. Nonetheless, I was your chief influence. You see, not only did I not *prevent* the people from turning lukewarm towards Christ, I led them into lukewarmness.

David Tomas: I don't understand.

Terry Maclin: Think back a few weeks ago when the board was challenging denominational practices. You were actually turning to the Bible for guidance before I gave a subtle threat. I can still remember my words, "I am a licensed and ordained minister of our denomination, and as such have agreed to abide by denominational bylaws and policies. I am committed to head office and the standard they have set." Does everyone remember that?

Everyone: Yes. Yes, I remember.

Terry Maclin: In fact I was saying either we go the way we have always gone or risk losing me. Not long after speaking those words, everybody changed their tune. Brent, you said, "The *Center* without Pastor Mac is unthinkable!" And everyone agreed. I steered you away from the Bible! And when I steered you away from the Bible, I steered you, to a degree, away from Christ!

Shaun Edwards: Don't be so hard on yourself, Pastor Mac. That was one time.

Terry Maclin: No, it was a pattern. I asked the Lord to show me how I went astray, and He did. I was a different person years ago. I was on fire for Christ. Doesn't anyone remember?

Shaun Edwards: I remember, Pastor. So was I.

Sheldon Waters: I remember. I guess I thought it was just natural to lose enthusiasm as one matured. I certainly have.

Terry Maclin: Jesus taught one cannot serve two masters, but I certainly tried. I started off serving Christ and ended up serving our denomination. Slowly, imperceptibly, my loyalty began to shift from Jesus to headquarters. When I noticed a conflict between the Bible and policy, I chose policy. Soon, choosing policy over the Word became instinctive.

David Tomas: I think an example would help clarify. Can you think of an example?

Terry Maclin: I can think of several, but will give just one. When I was a young Christian I could not

consolidate the concept of being led by the Holy Spirit and the concept of tithing. I did a thorough study of the New Testament and could not find one example of a Christian tithing or being instructed to tithe. Giving, yes. Generosity, certainly. Tithing, definitely not. Even though we were taught in Bible school tithing is a requirement, I hung on to my conviction though careful not to express it. When I became a pastor I had a choice to make. Do I stick to my conviction or go with accepted custom? Understand if I made a stand against tithing I would have no career as a pastor in our denomination. And so I simply had the basket passed to collect tithes and offerings. I didn't actually preach tithing, not at first, but implied it was expected. When we started building our church we needed more funds; it was at that time I completely forsook my conviction and began preaching tithing. As odd as it may sound, I actually came to believe, in time, God wants his people to give ten percent to the local assembly, such was my confidence in the wisdom of my superiors which had come to surpass my confidence in the Bible. And, as you know, I have regularly coerced the congregation to tithe.

Nelson Chesney: Pastor, my hands are sweating and my heart is racing from all these setbacks. I must say, I am surprised a licensed pastor would compromise his principles like that.

David Tomas: Nelson, the pastor is saying he *couldn't be* a licensed minister if he were not willing to compromise. I would like to confess the same sin. You see, I don't believe in tithing either. I never have. And yet if I didn't tithe I could never serve at the *Center* in any meaningful capacity. I would not be on this board, and neither would any of us.

Shaun Edwards: Thank you, David. Now it's my turn. I have always known there is no example of giving a title to a man, and yet I have always called Pastor Mac *Pastor.* I cowered to peer pressure.

Terry Maclin: Shaun, if you did not call me *Pastor,* I am ashamed to say, you would not be on this board. I would have considered you to be rebellious, a bad example to others. You would not be the Sunday school superintendent, not even a teacher. You would not have been given any responsibility whatsoever. I would have made you feel like a second rate adherent. Either you would have capitulated, or you would be pressured to look for another church. There is only one man who refused to bow to my unspoken demand to be called *Pastor.*

Sheldon Waters: May I ask who that one person is?

Terry Maclin: Reuben Tanner. I am ashamed to say I never gave Reuben an opportunity to serve in a meaningful way though I have always recognized a spiritual stability. For fifteen years he has been an usher. I never even asked him to be head usher, but always appointed someone less worthy, usually someone younger. But Roo served faithfully, never complaining once in fifteen years. Nor could I sense any bitterness. And during those years he and his wife have been praying for *my best friend.*

Sheldon Waters: Would that be the one everybody calls Tree?

Terry Maclin: Years ago I gave a picture of Tree and his wife, Sally to a few people in the congregation. I used to do that.

Sheldon Waters: I remember, Pastor. You gave their wedding picture to my wife and I. We prayed for two or three months.

Terry Maclin: Reuben and Jeni prayed faithfully for fifteen ……

Sheldon Waters: Go easy, Pastor. Here are some tissues.

Tony Borric: A few of us could use some tissues down this end of the table.

Terry Maclin: Forgive me, gentlemen. I think I've regained my composure.

Sheldon Waters: We are all attentive, Pastor. Take your time.

Terry Maclin: The Tanners have been much more faithful to someone they didn't know than I was to my best friend. And their prayers were answered, at least in part. Tree became a Christian early Monday morning. While we were playing baseball Reuben and Jeni were looking for Tree and Sally and their children. Tree had just said final good-byes to his family, but Roo and his wife rounded them all up and brought them home to their ranch. They will be staying with the Tanners one full year. I believe in that time God will restore the family.

Most: Praise the Lord!

Terry Maclin: I was making the point that I steered the congregation away from the Word and into submission to man's traditions. You see, the only way I could become successful as a minister was to please my superiors. To please my superiors I had to bring *everyone* into submission to policies and customs they deemed to be sacred. There was nothing intentionally sinister to this; we were all the blind leading the blind.

Donald Williamson: I must say, to call our spiritual leaders blind is a bit harsh, Pastor Mac!

Terry Maclin: I hope you can see I am not pointing the finger of blame at anyone, but rather everyone. We are all to blame, even those in the congregation. They each *allowed* themselves to be led away from dependence of the Bible. Nonetheless, leadership must also take ownership for their own words and actions. I have repented for my betrayal to Christ. I am deeply sorry for leading the congregation away from the Lord Jesus. Please understand when I led people away from the Bible I was leading them, relationally, away from Christ. I apologize to every man here for the harm I have done by my compromising.

Sheldon Waters: I think we *have to* compromise our individual beliefs if we hope to fit into *any* evangelical church. Would you agree, Pastor?

Terry Maclin: Unfortunately that is true. I am certain there was not one minister at the conference who did not preach tithing and collect tithes, but *surely* at least *some* disagree with the supposition a

New Covenant person is obligated to tithe. I say this to make the point *everyone* must compromise if he hopes to serve in a significant manner in evangelicalism.

Donald Williamson: Surely, Pastor Mac, you are not accusing every minister of every denomination of compromising their convictions!

Terry Maclin: That might be going too far, Donald. Some do it in ignorance. Perhaps many, even most, are guilty of presumption. I can't say. But the ugly truth is if a licensed minister made a stand for a conviction contrary to accepted policy, he would not have much of a future in his denomination.

Donald Williamson: How could one expect otherwise? If everyone were allowed to express his own opinions every congregation would be at risk.

Terry Maclin: You have a point. But on most issues there should be room for differences of opinion.

David Tomas: Give us an example, Mac.

Donald Williamson: *Pastor* Mac, Tomas!

David Tomas: No longer, Mr. Williamson! As you know, *pastor* means *shepherd.* I have one pastor, *Pastor Jesus!*

Some: Amen!

Terry Maclin: An excellent example is, again, tithing. Why can't people be allowed to evaluate Scripture for themselves to decide if they should or should not tithe?

Donald Williamson: We would lose our unity!

Terry Maclin: How many times I have preached unity. Brothers, unity should not be our god. God should be our God. Should everyone be expected to lay aside his or her convictions to keep unity? Let me ask, how many in this room honestly believe tithing is *not* a New Covenant requirement? Including mine, I count four. Now how many firmly believe tithing *is* a requirement? Three. And undecided? Two. You see, if we are representative of our congregation it indicates many in our congregation are coerced to go against their conscience. Shaun, I defer to you. Is there one biblical precedent for compromising one's convictions to maintain unity?

Shaun Edwards: None that I can think of. Actually, the Lord often requires us to take a stand against custom.

Terry Maclin: I want to say again, I had exchanged the lordship of Christ for the lordship of man, and compelled my congregation to do the same. I was blind to the fact we were a backslidden people. God had to send an *usher* to open our eyes.

Brent Anderson: Perhaps you are being too hard on yourself.

Terry Maclin: Brent, my precious brother, it gets worse. As the Holy Spirit was showing me my spiritual condition, through Reuben, my daughter, material I have read, and my own conscience, what kept me from hearing the obvious truth was *my need for a paycheck!*

Brent Anderson: Pastor Mac!

Terry Maclin: I relied on my paycheck to maintain house and home the same as most people in this room.

Donald Williamson: Well, who doesn't need a paycheck?

Terry Maclin: Exactly. And who doesn't do whatever is necessary to *protect* his paycheck? Ministers are no different. They, too, live paycheck to paycheck.

David Tomas: Mac, I feel terrible about the way I betrayed the Lord Jesus. Instead of taking a stand for righteousness, I cowered under peer pressure. How would you have treated me if I refused to compromise?

Terry Maclin: David, I love you, and I will be forthright.

David Tomas: Please do.

Terry Maclin: There are tricks of the trade in every profession, including mine. There are ways of bringing people to submission.

Donald Williamson: Perhaps this is going too far. Let's get on to *relevant* business.

David Tomas: This *is* relevant business.

Shaun Edwards: I, too, want to hear. Please, Mac, carry on.

Terry Maclin: First, you must understand how important it is to gain the pastor's approval. Church life is dreadful without it. And his recommendation is required if one wants to be involved in ministry outside the church or another church if one decides to switch. Add to this people's fear of rejection. What can be worse than being rejected by the one everyone considers to be God's spokesman? You can see the advantage every pastor has.

Shaun Edwards: Leverage.

Terry Maclin: Yes, leverage.

David Tomas: But how would you actually have pressured me to conform?

Terry Maclin: A rubbery handshake. Ignoring, even shunning. A look of disapproval, or even a questioning look. Retaining enthusiasm while showering others with enthusiasm. I think you get the picture.

David Tomas: I do.

Terry Maclin: Some ministers would not hesitate to use the pulpit to cull undesirables.

Nelson Chesney: Undesirables?

Terry Maclin: That is a word I privately used to describe someone who is exceptionally proud and arrogant, or someone who voices unacceptable doctrines, a person who is a hazard to the spiritual life of the congregation. But it could also be someone who doesn't believe in tithing, or refuses to call the pastor, *Pastor.* Or someone who speaks against the ministerial/layman concept. Or a number of other legitimate concerns.

Nelson Chesney: Very disturbing. All these methods are used to maintain unity?

Terry Maclin: Used effectively. Have you not noticed *everyone*, in all evangelical churches, calls the pastor, even the assistant, *Pastor?* Everyone is coerced, subtly or otherwise, to obey unwritten codes. Keep in mind unwritten rules are unwritten because they have no biblical precedent.

Sheldon Waters: Speaking of assistant pastor, where is Pastor Phil? Couldn't he make it tonight?

Terry Maclin: Phil Ferguson has resigned.

Others: Resigned? Why? What is he going to do? Our church is falling apart!

Terry Maclin: Phil and I met over lunch today, and I gave him all details. I relayed a message from Martin Johnston a new position, full time, would be awaiting him if he so chose. He decided to accept the offer.

Shaun Edwards: Was there hard feelings?

Terry Maclin: Not at all. He suggested I apply for his job as salesman. Brent, I will be in to see you.

Brent Anderson: You're hired. A man of your renown will attract business. You can work part-time or full time.

Terry Maclin: For now, part-time. I have much adjusting to do, spiritually. I want to spend most of my days pursuing Christ and feeding on the Word. I need a break.

Brent Anderson: I will personally show you the ropes. You will be a successful salesman in a month.

Nelson Chesney: Pastor Mac, *I* need a break! My head is spinning. We lost our pastor and our assistant pastor. Could we stop for coffee?

Terry Maclin: Before deferring to Sheldon, I would first like to publicly apologize to Tony. Tony, I am sorry. You were standing on principle by resigning. I should have supported you. Please forgive me.

Tony Borric: Done!

Terry Maclin: I want to thank both Tony and Reuben for coming on such short notice. You are welcome to join us for coffee.

Most: Yes. Amen.

Terry Maclin: Sheldon?

Sheldon Waters: A break would be in order, but we better make it a short one. We have much more business to discuss, right Pastor Mac?

Terry Maclin: Yes, much more.

friday, june 15th, 2007, 8:45 p.m.

Heavy the hearts that reconvened, caffeine having done little to solace the bewildered elders. Their leader was resigning, going another direction. The *Center* would never be the same for it was uniquely chiseled from the gritty character of a capable and determined leader. Mac was always there, like the morning paper on the front steps, always there. But now change had come uninvited, sameness no longer in command, uncertainty would reign for some time.

It would have been less painful if Mac were moving to another church or elevated to head office. Such was orderly. But no, he was saying good-bye to a life considered by most to be right and good in search of another. Would the board follow their leader onto a strange path?

Mac went over, chronologically, all the events since the day Reuben Tanner said, "I believe I have a message for the congregation. I request to have access to the pulpit," to the meeting he had with Martin Johnston and Frank Grover yesterday. Though most of the events were familiar to the board, the sequential report did much to bring clarity to the issues at hand. Mac explained to the six the future of *Bryden Falls Community Christian Center* was in their hands. Not he, not the superintendent, not district elders, not the congregation would be the decision-maker; *they* were the final authority. What they say goes.

Mac explained their two options.

One, they could go the way they have always gone, follow old patterns, remain under the spiritual umbrella of the denomination. Martin Johnston would provide necessary personnel to regain stability. His nephew, Peter Johnston, would be sent as an interim pastor for one year. The super had assured Mac his nephew is experienced and competent, most congregations would consider themselves privileged to have him. It is quite possible he would accept a permanent position of senior pastor if invited.

The second option is to forge a new way of gathering in the name of Jesus Christ, a manner more connected to New Testament saints. No salaried pastors. No titles. No tithing. No clergy-layman division. No denominational hierarchy. The Bible is authoritative. Elders oversee, but do not dominate. The pulpit is under the headship of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is exalted and recognized as supreme authority. Should they decide this direction they would be forever separated from denominational headquarters. Such a decision would surely be greeted with suspicion and scorn

from other evangelical churches. Mac would stay with them, as a fellow elder, until they were stabilized. Bringing Reuben and Tony on board would be a real asset.

Donald Williamson was appalled with the second option. David Tomas and Shaun Edwards were keen. Nelson Chesney and Brent Anderson were terrified. Sheldon Waters was undecided.

Williamson argued that the board was duty-bound to make the decision the congregation would want them make, for it was the people they served; undoubtedly church majority would opt for the status quo. But David Tomas and a few others were not so sure; perhaps it was God alone they should serve, and their responsibility was simply to do *right,* whatever right might be. All agreed that a tie vote would be a vote to remain fixed to the denomination.

Mac made sure they realized whatever choice they made – to remain or depart - the *Center* would never be the same. Already, he reported, several families were looking for another church. He warned them to brace for an exodus of many more after the announcement of his resignation, perhaps as many as a third or even more; Mac stated what they already knew – the people were attached to the *Center* because he and his family were the hub of the *Center*.

After much discussion it was decided the six board members would meet one week from tonight to make the all-important decision. Donald Williamson insisted the superintendent and his assistant be invited to meet with the board before Friday's meeting to get their perspective on the matter. When Donald said he would contact Johnston personally his eyes met Mac's and quickly darted away. Mac had identified his betrayer. Yet Mac's love for frosty old Donald decreased not the slightest.

It was decided Mac would come for their decision Saturday morning, the day after their meeting. He requested the board signify its decision by the Bible in the middle of the long table; closed signified the old way, open signified a new.

Mac asked for, and obtained, permission to address the congregation on Sunday morning before Reuben's oration. He would announce his resignation as pastor, and explain briefly the decision the board would be making on their behalf, and invite them to voice their opinions and concerns to the elders before Friday's meeting. When asked if he would encourage the people to be loyal to the church and support it through this time of turmoil, he replied he could not in good conscience advocate loyalty to any system not in accord to New Testament writings. However, he assured them he would not so much as hint they leave. Where could they go?

It was past eleven when they said the closing prayer.

saturday, june 16th, 2007, 6:30 p.m.

Mac was leading his Palomino by the reins, Tree an Appaloosa, as they headed back towards the Tanner residence. It had been a good afternoon for the two ex-marines, now brothers in Christ, wandering the hills, exchanging verbal jabs, rehashing old times. But now it was time for serious conversation, elder brother to younger.

"You seem to be content here, Tree."

"A better word would be *happy.* I've never been happy before, Mac, at least not since I was a kid."

"You're going to be here for a year?"

"Yep. Twelve months. Me and my family. I am praying Jesus will fix us. Maybe Sally and I will remarry and we can be a family again. We haven't talked about that, but I'm hoping."

"And praying?"

"And praying. I'm sure all the Tanners are praying too."

"And me."

"Tell me, pal, don't you think I should be going to church or something. Isn't that what *real* Christians do?"

"What do you think a real Christian is?"

"Well, someone who goes to church."

"You *are* a real Christian. I can see the change in you."

"I *have* changed. I'm not afraid anymore."

"Tree, you have everything you need right here. I envy you. I would gladly trade places. You don't need to go to church."

"But Mac, how can you say that? Christians go to church; even I know that."

"Not all. The apostles did not attend church, at least not anything that looks like our churches."

"Well, what did they do?"

"They met in homes mostly. Tree, listen to your elder brother in the Lord."

"I'm listening, man."

"Everything you need is here. You will never have an opportunity like this again. Try to see this as a gift from Jesus. He is providing you with a respite from all distractions and cares and addictions. This is an opportunity to let your roots go deep in Christ. He wants you to draw close to Him."

"But I already love Jesus! Now I want to serve Him, but I don't know how. There's a lot of work to be done here, more sheds to build, and corrals, and horses to look after, and there's a huge garden, and …"

"Whoa, little brother! Listen to Mac! Most Christians start out just where you are, full of passion for Christ, but usually all that passion is gone in a few years."

"Really?"

"That's *my* story. But now I am back on track with Christ, never to leave Him again."

"But Mac, I don't understand how Christians can lose their - what did you call it? - *passion.* I mean, I got it, and I'm just a baby Christian!"

"Listen to your bud, will you?"

"I'm listening, man."

"Why didn't you become a Christian twenty years ago when I first told you about Christ?"

"I don't know. I thought you had become a religious freak or something."

"Think about it. Did you think I would lie to you?"

"No."

"Then why didn't you believe me?"

"I don't know."

"Why did it take a man and a dog to dig you out of a grave before you believed what I told you twenty years ago and I have been telling you ever since?"

"I don't know."

"The answer is the same answer to your question, 'Why do Christians lose their passion for Christ?'"

"Really. Well, big brother, what's the answer?"

"A long time ago, and I mean a *long* time ago, there was a mighty angel in heaven who rebelled against God."

"You're kidding."

"He talked lots of angels into joining him."

"Like a dozen?"

"Like millions, perhaps billions."

"Wow! And."

"Well, he got kicked out of heaven and so did the angels who joined him."

"Serves them right."

"Soon he's on earth trying to get man to rebel against God."

"Was he successful?"

“You’ve heard of Adam and Eve.”

“I get it! You’re talking about satan! I heard about him. I always thought he was just a fairy tale. Hey, wait a minute! Is that the answer to your question, why it took me so long to believe?”

“Boy, you are one smart marine.”

“And he’s the one who gets Christians to lose their - what do you call it?”

“Passion. Fervor. Enthusiasm.”

“Well, he’s not getting mine, the rat!”

“Don’t underestimate him. He got mine and that of most of the people in my church.”

“No! How?”

“He's subtle. Jesus called him the father of lies.”

“The father of lies?”

“That means he invented lying. No one is better at lying and deceiving people than he is.”

“But he’s only one guy!”

“He has an army.”

“Big?”

“Huge.”

“And they’re all liars?”

“Yes.”

“What chance do we have?”

“They can’t get through Christ. And Christ protects those who stay close. The devil does what he can to separate us from Christ so we become vulnerable to his deceptions.”

“How does he separate Christians from Jesus?”

“He takes advantage of our ignorance, our weaknesses, our need to be accepted. We carry within us the effects of our past sins. We have pride to deal with. There is a part of us that wants to live for God, through Christ, and another part that wants to be independent of Christ. We want to do our own thing, something we can be proud of, something to prove to ourselves, and others, that we really are important and good.”

“That’s what happened to you?”

“Yes.”

“And your family?”

“And my family.”

“And the people attending your church?”

“Most of them.”

“And the Tanners?”

“No. They're different. They always stayed Christ-centered. They love the Lord. That's why they're so content. That's why they bear so much good fruit.”

“Fruit?”

“You know, good works. Good results. Good children.”

“I will do what Roo wants me to do. I will study the Bible. He sets time aside to communicate with Jesus ever day; I'm going to do the same. He has given me a book to read.”

“Who is the author?”

“Tozer.”

“A. W. Tozer?”

“That's the dude. Is he any good?”
“The best. If you read, no, if you *study* his material you will be a rich man indeed.”

“You mean he will show me how to make lots of money?”

“No, marine! *Spiritually* rich.”

“I think Reuben has over a dozen titles of this Tozer guy. Even the kids read them.”

“Great! By the way, I talked with Reuben about coming to visit you every Wednesday morning. What do you think?”

“Super!”

“I think it would be good for both of us. And I'll be your chore boy if you need anything from the outside world. You name it, I'll do it.”

“How about a dozen beer?”

“Hey!”

“Just kidding. I lost all desire for drinking.”

“Any flashbacks?”

"No. Roo told me I will never have to worry about that again."

"Say, isn't that Reuben and Jeni walking down the road towards the highway? Where are they going?"

"They're just walking. This is their time together. Every day they walk to the highway and back, holding hands."

"Every day?"

"So the kids tell me."

saturday, june 16th, 2007, 7:00 p.m.

"It's been a rough month for you, Reuben." Jeni wanted to comfort her husband as they were making their evening trek down their roadway.

"Tough for the entire Tanner family," Reuben responded. "Everyone is affected, you, me, the children. Are you okay, wife?" *Wife* was a term of endearment; she was his most prized earthly treasure.

"We have been going through the fire, but we are going together. It's so good having a family."

"And our precious five? How are they doing?"

"They are very protective of their father. They have been retaliating at any hint of criticism of you from their church friends. I had a long talk with them, explaining their friends are probably speaking from their pain and confusion. I assured them Daddy needs no defending. I think John is hurting the most. The concert was a flop, and he couldn't get a big hit in the ball game to win it for the *Challengers."*

"John is solid. He's a man. A young man, but a man. All the sacrifice I gave in raising my son was paid for one day in the dugout."

"Oh?"

"It was the game against the *Grizzlies."*

"Is that the game Jesus healed his broken leg?"

"That's the one. Everyone was staying his distance from me. John sat beside me, and said loud enough for everyone to hear, 'I love you, Dad!' He was supporting me when I needed it most at the risk of losing his acceptance with the team and the entire congregation. It took every ounce of strength to keep me from breaking down. Those words will ring in my ears everyday I live, 'I love you, Dad!'"

"I will love John Douglas the more after hearing that story. I love you, too, husband! We all do." And then, "What will happen to the Tanner family?"

Reuben hesitated before answering. “A while back you told me you felt the Lord saying major changes were coming. Since then we have adopted an entire family for a full year, and I rarely leave the ranch, running my business entirely from my office. But that may not be the end of the changes.”

“You are referring to the *Center?”*

“Yes. Mac has resigned.”

“No! But why?”

“Mac recommitted his life to Jesus on Thursday.”

“That’s wonderful!”

“He also committed himself to obedience to the Bible. He signed the last page of the Bible, a way of sealing his commitment before the Lord. He feels he cannot keep that commitment and remain pastor.”

“What will happen to the *Center?”*

“Mac related to me the details of the last part of last night’s meeting. The future of the *Center* is in the hands of the elders. They will decide to either remain under the auspices of the denomination, or break away from the denomination to run the *Center* in accord with New Testament writings.”

“What is your hunch?”

“There will be a heavy pressure on the men to vote to stay within the denomination. Before making their final decision on Friday of next week, they will be meeting with the superintendent, and possibly his assistant. They are very influential men.”

“When will we know?”

“Mac asked them to signal their decision with the Bible in the middle of the boardroom table. A closed Bible signifies everything is to stay the same.”

“And an open Bible?”

“An open Bible would indicate a decision to make changes, changes that would bring the church in harmony with the Bible.”

“What is the fate of the Tanners if the *Center* remains with the denomination?” Jeni questioned.

“We won’t be welcome. Neither will the Maclins.”

“Do you mean we may not be attending the *Center* after tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow could be our last day. Would we want to stay in a church that knowingly chooses man’s traditions over God’s Word?”

"We have so many friends," Jeni said. "Our children have deep roots there. But the answer to your question is *no.* But what will we do?"

"I don't know, not yet," Reuben responded. "Our children are strong. John is a positive influence on the younger ones. We will come through this if we rely on Jesus."

"Yes," Jeni confirmed. And yet she was still concerned for her man. "The *Center* is in a major storm, and you, dear husband, are in the very middle of it. Tomorrow will be a trying day. Will you be okay preaching to the congregation tomorrow morning?"

"This is a task I never asked for," the plumber answered, "yet I am honored to proclaim Christ to the people we both love. He will help me."

"He will, Reuben. Did the book Mac gave you to read help you?"

"No, just the opposite."

"Oh?"

"After reading it I wanted to throw in the towel. Just give up."

"And now?" wife asked.

"I was surprised when Mac asked me to give the last half of my message, since it was he who gave me the book. I agreed though still confused. Since then our precious Jesus has given me insights regarding *Building A Church On Wisdom's Foundation.* This book would be acceptable in any religion - Jehovah's Witness, Mormonism, Catholicism – an indication it is not *Christian*. For all of its practical wisdom, Jesus was almost entirely excluded."

"How easy it is to forget Jesus," Jeni added.

"How is the Kenny family doing?" Reuben asked.

"Sally is full of hope. She sees a definite change in Trevor since his conversion to Christ."

"Does that make her hungry for Christ?"

"Sally will become a Christian regardless of Trevor. I sensed a hunger in her even before bringing her here. She is cautious, has many questions, but very close to surrendering to the Lord."

"And her children?"husband asked.

"I'm leaving her children to our children. They are bonding, and bonding to our kids will cause them to bond to Jesus."

"You're right. And we will pray."

"Yes, husband, we will pray."

CHAPTER TWELVE

sunday, june 17th, 2007, 10:40 a.m.

Mac gripped hard on the pulpit. This was the most difficult oration of his career, even more so than that very first time he stood behind a pulpit as an insecure novice. He found it necessary to clear his throat often, to stay in command of his emotions. His people were spiritually disheveled, and he was letting go of their lives. No longer would he be their one-man steering committee. They would still be fenced in by his love and concern and prayers, but not his guidance.

He was convinced he had failed the Lord by misdirecting their affections and loyalties, and now felt powerless to reverse his mistakes. He was calling it quits. Vivian was grieving her losses at home, Kyle by her side. Katie was in her mom's spot, first row on the left. Some of the pews had empty spaces where regulars usually sat, other pews entirely empty. Mac knew next Sunday's attendance would be diminished further. The atmosphere was tense as Mac gave the same chronological account he gave to the elders two days ago. The people found it difficult to absorb his Thursday morning recommitment to Jesus Christ. How could their pastor, any pastor, be in such an unhealthy spiritual state to make recommitment to Christ necessary? When Mac announced his resignation he could hear their collective sighs, and sense the fear that accompanies sudden uncertainty.

And he could not comfort them or give them assurance. He didn't know what next week would bring. Their fate was in the hands of six men. He would not coerce them individually, though certain Donald Williamson would be lobbying on the phone, arguing his case, "The board represents the congregation, and it is obvious the majority want to remain under the helm of our denomination."

Mac tried to deflect the blame and anger from many which even at this moment was assailing Reuben Tanner - *If it weren't for the plumber this wouldn't have happened!* some were thinking. *Why couldn't he have left good enough alone? Way to go, Tanner! You just wrecked a beautiful church! Thanks to an* usher *our pastor is leaving us!* Mac tried to steer the blame where it belonged, on himself. He publicly thanked Reuben for his courage; he told the people he had examined Roo's message and found it faultless; he spoke of the positive effects his message had on several people; he testified if it were not for Reuben's preaching he would still be blind to his own backslidden condition; he even questioned the validity of a people who would not tolerate the preaching of Jesus Christ from their pulpit. Nonetheless, many remained adamant - they were losing their pastor, they were hurting big time, and Tanner was their only possible target.

When Mac finished speaking he stood silent for a full minute, clutching the pulpit, head hung low, desperately wanting to preach to his people a word of hope in Christ, knowing when he walked away from this podium he might never return. The congregation added his pain to their own, and tears flowed freely throughout the rows of people. Katie walked to the pulpit and slowly escorted her daddy, blinded by tears, to their seat.

Soon Reuben was behind the pulpit, soon Jeni was praying Holy Ghost power upon her husband,

soon the fear always accompanying public speaking vanished, soon Mrs. Waters was seated at the piano, uninvited but welcomed. Roo got right into it, no introductory remarks, nor did he make reference to the reaction to his message two Sundays previous, nor did he speak of Mac's resignation. Like the first part of his twofold exhortation, he was candid. He simply felt he was given an assignment and he should get on with it without fanfare. Roo was emboldened by Mac's admonition at the board meeting, "I encourage you to freely share your insights. Don't hold back."

May the name of the Lord Jesus Christ be glorified!

In response to my message two weeks ago, some of you have decided to return to fellowship with, and obedience to, the Lord Jesus Christ in greater measure. Most of you have not. This exhortation is directed to those who chose Christ. I will share several insights, for your consideration, how to draw closer to your Lord and Savior, King and God, Elder Brother and Friend.

But first, I have a question for those who know they have distanced themselves from Christ over the years, and have decided to reject, or postpone, His invitation to return to Him. My question is..... why?

Here, Roo was silent for a full moment. And then he asked again, ***Why?***, and waited another minute.

May I humbly suggest the answer to my own question?

The reason you do not return to the intimate relationship you once had with Jesus Christ is because of at least one idol in your life, perhaps more than one, perhaps several. An idol is a false god. There is something or someone between you and God, something or someone you love more. It is more common than most think for God's people to backslide. You know how the Israelites repeatedly turned to idols. Likewise, rare is the young Christian who grows steadfastly in his love for Jesus; most seriously regress at some time in their Christianity, some repeatedly, some permanently.

The very first man God created was the first to backslide. Adam loved God. (How could anyone know God, as Adam knew God, and not love Him? Such is impossible.) But Adam had an idol in his life, someone he loved more than God. Her name was Eve. Eve was healthy, beautiful, intelligent. I imagine her as someone who had a sense of humor, laughed a lot, pulsated with vitality, and was very attentive to Adam. She was his partner. When it came time to decide between his wife and God Adam chose his wife and he disobeyed God. Eve was Adam's idol.

Among us are many idols represented. For some of you, like Adam, your spouse is your idol. For others, it is your children. Some other false gods are friends, business, pleasure, money, ministry, entertainment, fashion. The most subtle idol is religiosity, the turning from Christ to works and custom. This usually involves the shifting of lordship from Jesus to religious man. I believe this is the chief idol of the Center.

Idols are destructive. Idols are blinding. Idols damage those around you. Idols keep you from intimacy with Christ. Idols will rob you of eternal rewards. Idols will hamper your ability to hear what the Spirit is saying. Picture a boy in class with a finger poked in each ear while the teacher is talking; so the man and woman with idols prevents him/herself from hearing truth and direction. And know your children will be influenced to adopt your idols as their own.

And also it must be said, some idols will cost heaven itself.

Every person here wants more of Christ, relationally, than what he or she has. But only a few want Him enough. Only a few are willing to depose their idols, their little gods. I plead with you, you who have refused to place your life under the lordship of Jesus Christ - reconsider. Count the cost of shuffling your First Love behind second and third and fourth. Do not reject Christ's invitation into meaningful fellowship with Himself.

Afraid. That is the word best describing the Andersons, Brent and his wife, seated five rows from the front, right hand side. Fear is a contagious curse and Mrs. Anderson became afflicted soon after their marriage in the mid-eighties. Though they lived and played and slept in prosperity, fear kept them from reveling in it. Every business decision in Brent's car sales business was engendered by anxiety, afraid to expand and afraid not to; fearful of hiring, fearful of firing; afraid of failure, afraid of bankruptcy.

And at this moment Brent was afraid of his own weakness. The *Center* needed decisive and strong elders at this historical junction, and he knew he was neither. Serving on the board of elders was to be a pastime, a diversion from business; never did he consider he would actually have to make a decision that mattered. The Andersons were two of many who rejected the plumber's call to return to Christ - Jesus was long ago replaced by business concerns and a love for things – and instead clung to their idols.

On Friday evening he was one of six who must make a decision that would seriously affect the lives of many – adults, teens, and children. The will of God was never a consideration since suddenly burdened with a responsibility he was incapable of handling; the fear of man, far surpassing the fear of the Lord, will determine his vote.

And now to those who have decided to follow Christ at all cost. I have a message for you, some insights for your consideration. I will suggest twelve means of gaining Christ relationally. But first, it is important to know drawing closer to Christ is a process. Change will come slowly, perhaps very slowly, but it will come.

You see, nobody - relationally speaking - is frozen; no one is at a standstill. Since you first believed in Christ you have either been elevating - attaining more of Jesus - or declining. Some years you may have been progressing, others regressing. A casual inspection of the church would bring the conclusion most Christians are on the decline. What one attains (through repentance and turning again to Christ) is a reverse of direction – no longer declining, but

inclining, gaining instead of losing. Picture a derailed locomotive. A huge crane is brought to the sight, the locomotive is lifted back on the tracks, and it is on its way. When you repent, sincerely, of lukewarmness you are lifted, by the Holy Spirit, back on track. You are on your way again. So as I share these twelve insights, don't think *arriving*, think *advancing*. Think being on track, going in the right direction.

One. Speak Christ.

Make a determined effort to speak His lovely name. There is power in the "name which is above every name." Speaking Christ will affect every listener. Not only will the mention of His name cause demons to tremble, it will take away the strength of one's own rebellious flesh. You can affect the condition of your heart by intentionally speaking the name of Jesus Christ. As you resolutely speak Christ in conversation He will become, more and more, your Lord. Your heart will come to yield to the lordship of Christ.

Have you noticed most Christians rarely speak the name of Jesus? Speaking His powerful name threatens their idols, so His name goes unmentioned. Their idols are spoken of often, but not so Christ. Can you see that Christians could overthrow their idols by consistently speaking His name? Can you see that your own heart will be positively influenced by speaking Christ?

Two. Give Jesus time.

Lots of time. Make time when you can, and ask God to make time when you cannot. Is it not reasonable to assume Christ will give you the necessary time required to sit at His feet? - for it is He who invites. Remember, it was Mary, not occupied Martha, who had chosen the better part. And will Jesus not give increase as your hunger for Him increases and as you prove faithful with the time He has given you? Give the Lord the first hour of the day. The first hour of the day is the firstfruit of the day, the first and best. If that's too much, give him a half-hour or even fifteen minutes. Make it a holy habit, never to be broken. Be faithful. In time, you may decide to spend other specific intervals of alone time with Christ throughout the day, perhaps a time in the afternoon and/or evening. In time, you might set aside an entire day, a Monday or a Friday or whatever. Life's priority must be pursuing Christ. Yes, pursuing Christ is to be a way of life. The more time spent seeking Christ, the more of Christ you will attain.

Don't let the secular world, nor Christians who pattern themselves after the world, decree what hours you are to work and not work. We are not called to pattern the secular world, to look to the world to determine our hours, vacation time, retirement age. Yes, such is sometimes necessary and right, but be mindful that your God is able to turn circumstances around to your favor.

I doubt that more than one of fifty North American Christians will finish the course the Lord has set before them, so intent are they to go with the flow dictated by both the world and the lukewarm, rather than flowing in the Spirit. When I say flowing in the Spirit, I mean voluntarily living your life under the governorship of the Holy Spirit. Do not emulate the crowd. If you have

hopes of completing your course, the Lord's commission on your life, you must resist peer pressure to live in the same manner as the majority who have no such ambition. Ask the Lord to make a way for you to spend time loving and serving Him. "This is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us."

A warning: You will know you are losing your fervor for Christ when you begin to renege on your meeting times with Christ. Those alone times will be the first to go.

The good news is that you could never fully lose your intimacy with Jesus if you keep your commitment to meet with Him daily.

Noble. Noble is the adjective most applicable to the Tanners seated three rows back, right hand side, John on one side of his mother, his siblings on the other.

Mac's sequential report centered around the children's father caused them to realize more fully the crisis Dad had been going through the past couple of months. He was the target of the agitation of many, and each of the five accepted his reproach as a Tanner reproach, and bore it with dignity. The Christ-centered possess a poise the lukewarm can only envy, a confidence resultant of an inner stability. Every Tanner was reflective, appreciative and spiritually hardy because every Tanner had a love-relationship with Christ. The *Center* was not their center, that is, not the center of their lives, and the plumber's message that brought division to the church unified them further. They would do just fine.

Three. "Be filled with the Spirit."

Do you realize you are totally dependent upon the Holy Spirit to draw relationally closer to Christ? The Holy Spirit will partner with you to bring about the will of God in your life. The Holy Spirit loves Jesus fully, and His desire is for you to love Jesus increasingly. "Holy Spirit, cause me to love Jesus" is a good prayer to be repeated a thousand times.

How does one become "filled with the Spirit"? Jesus taught, "Ask, and it will be given to you." "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" "Everyone who asks receives."

Some want the Holy Spirit for illicit reasons, wanting the power but not intimacy with Jesus. The purest motive for asking for the Holy Spirit is to gain Christ.

Four. Nourish yourself.

Be responsible. You are responsible for you. Feed on the Word of God. Contemplate the words of Jesus. Make a rule: "I will never read anything until I have first read the Bible." And be sure that at least some of your reading includes the words of Christ, red words in most Bibles.

And read quality books. There are many books written by Christ-centered disciples, and many more written by men and women laden with idols. How do you know the books to read and the

books to ignore? Ask the Holy Spirit to lead you to the books of His choice for you. To the degree you bow to His lordship, the Holy Spirit will faithfully guide you through every aspect of life.

I highly recommend the writings of A.W. Tozer. Most of Tozer's books are still in print though he died in the early sixties, such is the quality of his insights into the character of God and the spiritual deficiency of evangelicals.

Hopeful. The Tomas' were hopeful. Slender David and very pregnant Sheila sat with their two year old behind the Tanners, listening intently to Reuben's insights. Though they grieved for the assemblage they were hopeful something good, something fruitful would emerge from the chaos. What an adventure for the *Center* people if they were given opportunity to build anew, to start all over. No more traditions of man to govern their lives. No more titles and hierarchy and control. Jesus would be more than a symbolic lord, and the Holy Spirit would be their pastor. The *Center* would be an example to contemporary assemblies, proof that God's ways work.

Since the last meeting David and Sheila were in serious intercession for his fellow elders. David's Christianity – beginning at thirteen when a much younger Terry Maclin challenged the young people to get off the fence and make a courageous stand for Christ - had been dirtied with compromise; he was an evangelical and compromise is something evangelicals do. He was certain if the elders chose the path of conciliation the *Center* would continue to be an academy for the lukewarm. He was able to take his vacation early so he could spend his time before the Lord praying for his colleagues, and have time to lobby for a new way. He would not cower to Mr. Williamson or the two biggies from headquarters. He would be the man of God he was called to be.

Five. Forgive yourself.

When you sin turn immediately to your Sin-bearer for forgiveness. And accept it. Do not wallow in remorse. Do not focus on you who failed again, but rather on Him who forgave again. Sanctification does not come by critically gazing within, by trying harder, by whipping oneself with denunciations; sanctification comes by gazing upon the Sanctifier, by ceasing all effort to be good enough, by fully accepting the righteousness won for you by the bloodied cross.

It is your intention and determination to follow Christ that pleases Christ, not your ability to stay on course without faltering. It is the lukewarm, not the impeccable, whom He said He will spit out of His mouth.

Six. Stay free in Christ.

"Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage." Do not call a man by a title, even though others do. Never ask a man, "May I?" Don't accept anyone as mediator between you and Christ. Don't allow anyone to usurp the role of the Holy Spirit in your life. See yourself from the perspective of the Bible, and not that of others. Example: You are not a layman. You are not a denominational person. You are what God has made you to be, His

adopted son or daughter, an ambassador of the truths of God.

Faithful. The Borrics, Tony and his wife and daughter Tanya sitting halfway to the back on the left side, were faithful. Tony made his share of mistakes over his Christian years, but always responded to the gentle corrections of the Holy Spirit. Faithfully he served as an elder, as a carpenter, as a husband, and as a father.

Mrs. Borric was no less faithful, up early every morning with her husband, he in his private study, her in the sewing room, having alone time with Jesus; faithfully she attended women's prayer and Bible study; faithfully she served her husband. Shy and quiet Tanya had been faithful to her commitment to Christ throughout her teenage years, refusing to compromise to gain acceptance.

It was Tony's faithfulness to the Christ he loved that spawned his decision to resign from the board, and his loyalty to God's word that prompted him to close the Bible. Had he remained his vote could have done much good deciding the outcome of the *Center;* nonetheless, he never regretted doing what he thought to be right. He would contact every elder to express his opinion that this was an opportunity for them to stand for righteousness, to be an influence and example in the entire Christian community. Perhaps they too would be influenced to choose right over expedience.

Faithful. The Williamsons, sitting a few rows in front of the Borrics, too, were faithful. Faithfully the husband served the denomination as pastor, south of the border, for several decades, and faithfully the wife stood by her man through thick and thin. Their selfless loyalty was passed on, two sons and three grandsons were today pastoring within evangelicalism.

Donald was not hearing Tanner this morning. The plumber has bested him, fine, hats off to him. But he certainly wasn't going to consider his 'insights'. Now the fight was not against Tanner, but Maclin. Maclin had betrayed the denomination the old man loved and the leadership who trusted him. Now Maclin wanted to lead the board and the entire assemblage into a risky experiment, away from the spiritual umbrella of any and all denominations. Madness!

There was still fight in that old man. He arranged the arrival of Johnston and Grover to fly in Friday morning. He would pressure the board to do whatever necessary to be at a Friday p.m. meeting with the super and his assistant. An afternoon with the dignitaries a few hours prior to their scheduled evening meeting would do much for the cause. He had not forgotten how to use leverage.

Donald knew pressuring Edwards and Tomas between now and then would be a waste; they were both in Maclin's camp. He would apply his lobbying skills to Anderson and Chesney who he reckoned both lacked strength to buck the system. Their vote plus his equaled three and three equaled victory. If one of those failed to come through, there was still hope that Waters would be reasonable and vote to remain under the protection of the denomination.

Until then the faithful Williamsons would be in serious prayer.

Seven. Worship Him.

Join the heavenly choir in praise of "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." As you do, and to the degree you do, there will be a shift of focus from you to Him. You will slowly become like the One who has your attention. Behold and become. As you gaze you will change. As you obey you will change. Perspective will be loftier. Fruit will be bountiful. Rewards will be in the waiting.

Praise is more than song and clapping and dancing. Praise is also obedience. Most evangelicals praise Christ with their lips, but praise man with their obedience; they do this by choosing tradition over the Bible.

Also, praise is gratitude, the continual bearing of an attitude of thanksgiving and appreciation unto the Lord. And praise is generosity, sharing with Christ's people because they are Christ's, and giving to the unsaved because He died for them.

Eight. Keep good company.

No friendship is perfect, some friendships are beneficial, some are harmful. Likewise no church is perfect, some are beneficial, some, perhaps many, perhaps most, are actually harmful, depending on one's spiritual growth (a church that is helpful to a new Christian, may be a hindrance to someone wanting more of Christ then what that church is able to give). How silly for the passionate to place themselves under the ministry of the lukewarm for no other reason than to feel attached to Christian society. Do not under any circumstance commit yourself to a friend or to a church. What is beneficial this year may be a detriment next year. As you mature in Christ fewer can help you because you would have passed many by, because many simply do not want to go deeper in Christ. (This is in reference to *receiving from* others, not *ministering to* others.)

Do not choose the educated or licensed over the broken. Only the one dwelling in the secret place, only the one with moistened eyes, only the one broken in Christ bears the anointing that can break through the strongholds of your life. Some think healthy Christianity is bouncing from one Christian friend to another. This could be nothing more than restlessness, or a need for an audience, a futile attempt to squeeze from flesh what is only attainable through intimacy with Jesus.

Fellowship versus alone time, it's a matter of balance.

Confused. Nelson Chesney, on the right opposite the Borrics, was confused, having more questions than answers.

Nelson loved accounting. He could always depend on the numbers. Long before he was born and long after he was gone, two plus two equaled four. If only life were as certain as mathematics. He thought he had a stable family - until cancer stole his wife, leaving him to raise five children alone. The *Center* was his last refuge of stability, Pastor Mac was a solid rock; now all was upheaval.

How could it have happened? How could one insignificant plumber cause such turmoil? And how

could Pastor Mac abandon them? And how could Christians who believe in the same Bible be in conflict?

Nine. Learn generosity.

Generosity will draw you to Christ as stinginess will pull you away. Generosity opens the heart. As you give you will stretch your faith in Christ, making yourself reliant on His provision. You will find giving will hurt less and less as you give more and more. Giving is following through on the sweet things you say to Jesus in prayer.

Ten. Break the bread.

Have your own communion service with Jesus, as well as with others. You may decide to "do this in remembrance" of Him daily. When Jesus said, "Do this," He was speaking to you. Others may say, "Don't do this (at home, by yourself, etc.)," but Jesus said, "Do this." Whom will you obey? Breaking the bread and drinking "the fruit of the vine" is an excellent way of drawing closer to Christ, by yourself and with others.

Broken. Shaun Edwards, seated with his wife in the same pew as the Borrics, was a broken man, fully repentant. Like everyone there, he started out well. He responded to Mac's invitation to receive Christ when the church was in its beginnings in the Maclin residence, and was for years after a flame for his Jesus. He had a huge heart, wanting to pour himself into the lives of the saved and unsaved.

Shaun was studious and intelligent. His knowledge of Scripture soon surpassed his teachers and in time he was elevated to Sunday School Superintendent. There was a day, many years ago, when his love for the *Center* – the people, his status, social ties, recognition - surpassed his love for Christ, a common story, and it was downhill from there. Until the plumber's preaching two weeks ago.

This morning his brokenness went deeper as he realized he had years ago taught others many of the insights the plumber was now sharing. He recommitted his life to Jesus Christ last week, and this very hour, following Mac's example, committed himself to obedience to the Bible he loved, signing the last page as a declaration to Christ.

Eleven. Always choose Christ.

It is a mistake to try to sanctify yourself. Sanctification will come as you bow to and worship the Lord Jesus. One day the Holy Spirit will, in His gentle manner, ask you to give up a habit or a reliance (upon something or someone). If you obey the prompting of the Holy Spirit you are actually obeying Christ. You are making a decision for Jesus. Your obedience will cause you to be drawn closer to Christ. Contrary to this, if you disobey you will distance yourself, somewhat, from Christ. Your disobedience could put you on the path of backsliding again.

I will give one example. Let's say you are one who talks too much. Talking interferes with listening. You are so intent on vocalizing you become unteachable. You have an unusual need to

give an opinion about every subject. Jesus loves you, immensely, regardless. However, there will be a day when He will ask you to confront that bad habit. Jesus will empower you as soon as you take steps of obedience. Obedience will gain you Christ. But should you ignore or disobey His promptings, you will lose a degree of intimacy. You will be the loser.

Burdened. Both Maclins, father and daughter, seated in the front pew were deeply burdened for the people. A crushing thing, regret. Mac had caused his people to sit at the feet of his lord and idol, and now he, after making them captives, was himself set free. A terrible irony.

Would he be given opportunity to bring freedom to those he betrayed? To revive others as he and his pigtails have been revived? To fan the embers he was certain were still warm in those good hearts?

Many would leave, no matter what decision the board made. Where would they go? What evangelical church in the city could/would lead them into a deep and intimate relationship with Christ?

Mac would pray faithfully for those who left and those who stayed. And so would Katie.

Twelve. Expect and accept adversity.

Christ is free, but Christ isn't cheap. Actually, He is very expensive. Think back to the time you first received Christ. Though it was a tremendous experience, it brought complications. Likewise there are complications in store for the one recomitting his/her life to Christ. Do not be taken by surprise.

When you lose friends do not assume there must be something wrong with you. It is only natural the lukewarm will no longer want your company; you will make them feel uncomfortable, though they will not know why. Should you foolishly confront them, they would deny such is true. A fruit of idol worship is blindness; they cannot see.

Understand that those wanting Christ today are avoided by those wanting Christ tomorrow. Marthas and Marys don't get along too good. Those laden with religious ambitions have little in common with those whose only ambition is to gain Christ. They will be buds only with those who play their religious and worldly games, and idolize their idols. I assure you, embracing Christ as a lifestyle will cost you friends.

And there is a greater price: Embracing Christ will cost you YOU. You see, both Christ and you want to be seated on the throne of your life. There is a battle over the lordship of YOU. Perhaps that's the reason most avoid Christ; Christ threatens the YOU in you. You instinctively know for Christ to increase, the YOU in you must decrease.

There is a price attached to the Pearl of Great Price. Paul was put to death because he embraced Christ. John was banished to Patmos because loving Christ was his life. Persecution awaits

everyone determined to live with and for and under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Hopefully, these twelve points will help you draw closer to Christ. Please understand you can have more of Christ if you want more of Christ..... *enough*. Every Christian has exactly as much of Christ as he or she wants. If you wanted more you would have more; if you wanted less you would have less. And..... if you now want more you can have more.

I challenge ever person in this room: Do you want more of Christ? I believe every person could truthfully reply yes. Now let me rephrase the question: Do you want Christ *enough*?

Undecided. Sheldon Waters, now taking Reuben's place behind the pulpit, was right in the middle of this way and that way, the new and the old. He loved Pastor Mac like a father loves a son, but was unconvinced his way was best for the *Center*. He thought he knew where the other elders stood, Nelson Chesney a possible exception. Sheldon's vote could matter immensely, and both the negatives and the positives in the congregation would apply pressure to conform to their preference. After listening to their arguments and suggestions, he would reply, "I have heard both sides, and I am still undecided. Please pray for me."

Sheldon was supposed to be leading in song, but nothing would come out, their was no song in him. Mrs. Waters continue to play her sweet, anointed music at the piano.

Distraught. There are many adjectives to describe the congregation of Bryden Falls Community Christian Center at this moment – angry, confused, sad, fearful – but the most descriptive word was distraught. Distraught like the parents who discovered their teen ran away from home. Distraught like the neighborhood after a tornado.

Some left quickly, never to return. Others embraced Pastor Mac with deep affection and appreciation, some looking for assurance in his moistened eyes, but none was there. Though there had not been an altar call, several were there on their knees at the altar, seeking solace and direction.

saturday, june 23rd, 2007, 9:15 a.m.

Three of the four Maclins were at the *Center* cleaning and packing. Kyle was at home, embarrassed, angry, confused. A few weeks ago he was a somebody, the pastor's kid off to seminary, captain of a prominent band; now he had been demoted to less than an ordinary. His dad had been toppled by a layman/plumber/usher, and his band had disgraced itself before the city. And it wasn't his fault; he was a victim, an innocent with every right to be angry.

Vivian suffered the same fate as her son, only her losses were more intense. She had been number two at the *Center,* number one's wife, but now that was all history. As the minister's wife she was a step above layman, but now she must join the ranks of the common. And there was no hope of a comeback; her husband pledged he would never pastor again.

Katie would be at her father's side these trying days. She had always esteemed her daddy, and that esteem puffed considerably the last few days. He had demonstrated courage and humility, strength and integrity in what surely was the most distressing time in his ministry. And now they had much in common, a renewed enthusiasm for Jesus. She was privileged that he allowed her to share his burdens.

While Katie was straightening and wiping the sanctuary chairs and Vivian was packing books and fifteen years of miscellaneous things from Mac's office, Mac was polishing the pulpit. The knowledge of his and their future, and that of the entire church, was lying on the boardroom table, and Mac was afraid to look. He kept on polishing.

"Were you in the boardroom?" he asked his wife when she came back to the sanctuary.

"Yes, for a few minutes."

"Tell me, was the Bible opened or closed?" He worked the polish a little harder.

"Does it matter?"

"It matters."

"But what difference does it make?"

"Vivian, I must know. Was the Bible opened or closed when you entered the boardroom."

"It was closed."

"Are you sure?"

"I am sure."

"Oh."

The bottle of polish was empty, and Mac had only begun his chore. He reckoned this was the fourth or fifth bottle he used on the pulpit since he and Reuben first polished it that snowy January day. He had made it his business to keep the pulpit clean and glossy over the years, and it would be in prime shape before he left.

The elders had made a decision to remain under the protection of the denomination. Tomorrow the interim pastor would be speaking to his people, and the business of regaining normality would begin.

There was only one kind of polish Mac found acceptable, and sometimes he had to look in two or three stores to find it. Most polishes were in spray cans but Mac preferred the liquid. He didn't like the idea of getting spray in the air, and the liquid was easier to work into the wood.

He empathized with the elders. They were not accustomed to making decisions of this magnitude,

and he could well imagine the pressure to conform to majority opinion. Stepping outside of evangelical norm would have the immediate effect of making the *Center* the hub of controversy, and the finger of blame would be pointed at the six.

It would be a shame to buy a new bottle of polish when he only needed a little to finish the job. As far as he knew, this particular polish only came in a large size, and it was quite expensive. He couldn't charge it to the *Center* because he was no longer its captain.

He couldn't help but wonder how the vote went. For sure, Donald voted to stay in the denomination. David and Shaun seemed to be strong in their allegiance to the Bible. But what about Sheldon? And Nelson and Brent?

Mac decided the job must be finished, though he could lose much time trying to find another bottle. It just seemed fitting to leave the pulpit in good shape, though none, he was sure, would notice.

Too bad he would never be given an opportunity to undo the damage he had done. Good thing he convinced the elders to give Reuben the opportunity to finish his message; he was sure at least a few would never forget. Too bad the *Center* could not be a catalyst within evangelicalism to bring about a better way of gathering unto Christ. Good thing some in the *Center* found their way back to Christ, including his precious Katie. Too bad people like Tony and Reuben and Shaun and David would never be given an opportunity to share their insights and convictions with the people. Good thing Reuben's house was open to people like David Tomas and many others who wanted to pursue Christ.

Mac had polished until his rag was dry. He couldn't put it off any longer; he must go and hunt down some more polish though he didn't like leaving the girls by ……

The hand that rested on his shoulder was too strong to be Katie's, and Vivian never did that sort of thing. Turning around, he was elated to see his old acquaintance and new friend.

"Roo!"

"We came to help," Roo pointed to Jeni and John.

"The Bible was closed."

"I thought it would be."

"You and I will not be welcome."

"We are braced for that. We did not tell the younger kids until we were sure of the vote."

"Where are they?"

"They are at the baseball field playing. We are giving the Kennys time to themselves."

"How are they doing?"

"Adjusting quite well. They need time. Can we help?"

"Jeni, Vivian is in the office clearing out my stuff. She could use a friend."

John was embarrassed to see Katie, and Katie equally embarrassed to see John. Had they known the other would be here they would have stayed away. John followed his mom to the office and started loading boxes into *Reuben's Plumbing* van. Mac and Roo sat on the floor near the pulpit and chatted about the consequences of the elders' decision. Katie hurried to finish her chore so she could leave for home.

"I am out of furniture polish," Mac said to his new friend.

"Maybe we should send the kids for more," Reuben suggested.

"Kids? John and Katie?" Mac tried to hide his excitement. Just then Jeni and Vivian entered the sanctuary, each with questions about what to do with this thing and that.

"Mac is out of polish," Reuben said to his wife, "and I suggested we send John and Katie to pick up some more. What do you think?"

"I think that is an excellent suggestion," Jenni replied. "What do you think, Vivian?"

At first Vivian seemed alarmed at the suggestion, but then, "Oh, yes. I suppose that would be okay. What do you think, Terry?"

"An excellent suggestion!" And before anyone could change his or her mind he opened the sanctuary door leading into the hallway and called for John returning for another load. "John! Please come here for a moment!" And then, "Katie, please come up here for a moment."

And when everyone was together, "I ran out of furniture polish while polishing the pulpit. Mr. Tanner thought it would be a good idea if you and John went and bought another bottle. It has to be exactly the same as this one. You may have to look in two or three stores. Do you think you two can handle that?"

Katie looked at John, and John looked at Katie. Then Katie looked to her mom.

"Mom?"

"I think that would be okay."

"Dad? Mom?" John asked his parents.

"Well, we do need polish," Reuben answered.

"Yes, of course. Are you with me, Katie?"

"Yes, I am with you."

“And pick us up a coffee on the way home!” Mac shouted to the young pair hurrying out the door.

“You got it, Daddy!” Katie shouted back.

The old man with the dignity and the warm smile entering the foyer was unnoticed by John and Katie chattering nonstop as they loaded innumerable boxes into the van. Jeni and Vivian were sipping their coffee at the boardroom table, renewing the friendship that had crumbled many years ago. For several seconds the old seer gazed at pastor and plumber working the polish into the oak of the eminent pulpit. On his way out the front door he stopped to scratch the new red carpet with the tip of his cane, and seemed satisfied.

Mac and Roo quietly and vigorously buffed the oak with dry, soft rags. It was Mac who broke the silence.

“Powerful brute, isn’t it?”

Roo knew what he was referring to. “It is.”

Again they worked in silence, a beautiful sheen spreading over the pulpit. Ten minutes later it was Reuben who broke the quiet.

“Love you, Mac.”

“Love you, Roo.”