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My testimony for Elder-want-to-be consideration

By Jeff Cebulski

After over 20 years of fervent Catholic church involvement, mixed with a number of experiences that convinced me that God was ordering my life toward a decision-making moment, I gave my life to Christ while kneeling at my bedside in the fall of 1970.

I endeavored to follow what directions I felt I was given to begin this new-er life. I married the woman who shared her testimony with me; I accepted a call to serve the Lord in Christian radio; and I was convicted to move away from behind a microphone and into education, motivated by a desire to act out my faith and to more securely support a growing family.

Barb and I see the “adventures” of our life together as the result of our “open door” decision-making policy---we pray, we wait, and go if the “door” is open.

While I was still with the radio station, a message I preached at a small Baptist church touched the congregation to the point that I was asked if I would become the Sunday pulpit-filler and part-time minister. I accepted that call with the caveat that I would be finishing my pre-teaching education in the meantime. That experience became crucial later on. After my first four years as a public school English teacher and coach, I suffered a ‘burnout’ experience during my next teaching position and needed to find work. A local non-denominational church needed a part-time pastor. After a couple of Sundays, they decided to hire me. On the first day of my job, I found a letter sent to the church by the principal of a new Christian high school less than 15 miles from our home. They needed an English teacher; I needed more work. I was hired there and spent the next three-plus years working in two ministries. Eventually, some important members of the church decided they wanted someone more “officially qualified” to be a pastor. Fortunately at the same time, the school was growing and I could work there full-time. So I left the pastorate, kept my family at the same church (why not?), and moved fully into Christian education.

After eight years at the school, it became clear to me that some opposing forces within the church administration and our school board were negatively affecting our ability to make plans and goals for our students, as well as making it clear that the faculty was expected to make some sacrifices that were unfair to people like me. I won’t go into detail, but I went down into my basement and asked God directly for advice on what to do. Less than 48 hours later I received an unsolicited phone call from the principal of the local high school where I suffered the burnout. Remembering me, he offered me a job that would essentially grant me some seniority, as well as providing for my family benefits the Christian school was in no position to supply. While I was confused that God would answer my appeal in this way, I accepted that “open door,” and moved on.

We were still members of our local church, which in time became a member of the Evangelical Free Church. I became an Elder and served in that capacity for several years, experiencing the

highs and lows of leadership. Eventually, I was offered an opportunity to complete a master's degree at Kennesaw State University and decided to go forward, as I had earned a leave of absence. This decision was life-changing; Barb and I essentially moved south, with Barb merely changing her airport of choice to Atlanta (she was traveling for a living as a laboratory inspector). During the next year, 2001-2002, we had a remarkable experience that eventually convinced us God had blessed the choice and given me a new vision for the final phase of my career as an educator. In 2004, I was given the chance to enter into the Georgia higher educational system. Believing this was another "open door," I accepted the opportunity.

God used this time to show us His love. I spent three years as a Visiting Instructor at one university until it decided my time was up. At exactly the right time, a more permanent position as Lecturer was open at my favored school, Kennesaw State. With the support of a number of people I had gotten to know and who had seen me in action, I was hired. Meanwhile, post 9/11 travel stress had begun to take its toll on Barb. One Sunday she saw an ad from a fledgling company that desired to provide Continuing Education courses for laboratory workers. While she would be part-time at the start, my wife was unusually qualified for this job. Less than an hour after she sent her resume, she received a call. We prayed hard—I became convinced this was the way out of travel health woes for Barb. She decided to accept the position and gradually worked into a full-time job that could be performed mostly from home. And the company grew with her as a course developer.

Our church experience down South was frustrating, to be honest. The cultural affectations, along with the growing political divide, made it difficult for us to be comfortable. Eventually we did find a church that met our needs, but it was too late—Barb, after 11 years with her company, decided to retire from full-time work. Being fair, I decided to ask her what the next stage should be. She wanted to move back north to be closer to our children, their children, my folks, motivated particularly by the anticipated adoption of a child by our oldest daughter and her husband.

Again, the "open door" occurred. I was concerned about the financing and particulars of such a move, but it was made a lot easier because my daughter and son-in-law offered to make the financing of moving into Chicago easier. There's other details involved, but it became clear to me that moving back (I could have stayed for another year or two, renting and stuff) was a better choice than spending time away from my wife. She would have let me do that, but God gave me a good reason not to.

During our visits up north, we had become acquainted with First Free because Mike and Christine and our Therese were attending there. We liked Pastor Bill's teaching and the general spirit of the church. So I was looking forward to being a part of all that.

Yes, the eventual difficulties that First Free experienced were disappointing to us. But since the Lord had timed our move up here, I was very hesitant to just pick up and leave. Obviously, my choice to attend service when Daniel offered the Houston post-hurricane ministry trip and my practically instant response (with Barb's immediate blessing) is a key reason I can write this testimony. It was just another validation to us about our "open door policy" we have lived within for so long.

I consider my spiritual gift to be teaching, though I have been used in forms of administration and counseling. I do strive to be an independent Christian thinker and Bible reader, finding theology to be a more fluid construct than is often cemented into belief systems. The things we can be “certain of” are deeply fundamental, yet much of church tradition has often sullied the Spirit and dimmed the flame of the Gospel.

I believe I can contribute to First Free some wisdom from experience and, perhaps, a fresh perspective, even if I am in my 8th decade. Christianity and its institutions can be vital and “peculiar” if we allow the Spirit and Mind of Christ to guide us. The Scriptures, well-studied, can help us seek the kind of presence that affectively represents our Lord in these times.