

Chapter 18

WITNESS OF THE BRETHREN

When the Lord closed the door upon our first dreams of coming to Canada, I little thought that He was preparing a way before us that we would only see in retrospect many years later. Without that disappointment, the wasted application, the letter to Bloor Street, I would not have met Professor Carlisle, obtained the 'Type A' certificate and taught at the Hebrew Academy. He had planned that I would speak to those wonderful students and had prepared the way twelve years before. But He also had other plans; other threads to weave together in the tapestry of our lives.

Four weeks after arriving in Canada, we were beginning to settle in. Our furniture was in the new house, our girls were enrolled in school and we were looking for a new church home. As we had enjoyed hearing Dr. Wesley White speaking at a local United Church of Canada, we decided to attend that church on the first Sunday morning that we were in our new home. We climbed into our little car - loaned to us by a parent at the school - and set off for the church. There was only one problem; we did not know where it was located! We hoped we might recognise the streets but, after a while, we realised we were not going to arrive on time for the service.

We were driving north on Brimley Road when I noticed a church sign. It read, "Brimley Road Alliance Church".

"Hey! Isn't that the same denomination that John Bechtel belonged to in Hong Kong?" I said. "Let's attend that church this morning, before we are too late for any service anywhere." Hearing no loud voices of dissent, I turned the car around and drove into the small carpark behind the church. The congregation were just finishing the first hymn as we were ushered to our seats. We immediately felt at home and enjoyed this fellowship of about one hundred people led by Pastor John Bersche. Over the next four years John and his wife, Jan, became very special friends, teaching us so much of the 'Spirit-filled' life. They ministered to our hearts, both in song and in the teaching of the Word. Meanwhile, their four children and our three girls became close friends, so much so that we could never miss a Sunday service, morning or evening, without grumblings from our daughters!

After two years at the church, I was appointed to serve on the elders' board and, as such, was present at some lengthy discussions with the District Superintendent, involving a disciplinary matter at the church. It was this same District Superintendent, Rev. Melvyn Sylvester, that I was to approach two years later with my enquiry about opportunities for lay preaching.

"Gareth, why don't you consider coming into full-time pastoral ministry?" he asked me. "What are you waiting for - a flash of light from Heaven?"

"I guess so." I replied, "I've seen too many men in pastoral positions who display no evidence of God's calling or unction upon them. I would not want to be in such a position without the assurance that God had called me there."

"All I'd need is 'the witness of the brethren'" said Mel.

I went home having no idea of the amazing things that were going to happen over the next six months. Our pastor, John, decided to leave the church for a traveling singing and teaching ministry. I was the only elder in the church with preaching experience so was invited to speak at his fare-well service. I spoke on Elisha taking up the mantle of Elijah, found in 2 Kings 2. After the service several people made nice comments but two made a striking impact on me as they were both retired pastors.

"Young man, you shouldn't be in a school teaching. You should be in the pulpit preaching"!

Was this what Mel meant by 'the witness of the brethren'?

The family returned home to Wales at that time for a month vacation. A warm welcome was given us and we were overjoyed to see that the youth work had continued to grow. Many new believers had been added to the church. Each Sunday morning I was invited to preach to a standing-room only congregation. Those services were different! I had preached from this pulpit many times but had never seen the response to my preaching that I was now experiencing. Was this a further 'witness of the brethren'? I began to pray very earnestly!

When we returned to Canada, it seemed that every week would bring another 'evidence' of God's calling into the 'full-time' ministry. I knew that this was certainly not in Anne's plans for our future so I was driven to earnest prayer. Each day as I drove the twenty-one miles across the city to school, I used my car as a 'prayer closet', appealing to the Lord to give me clear directions and to confirm if this was really His call on my life. I was now earning a very good salary, was enjoying my work and had three daughters already dreaming of a new house - with a swimming pool.

By the end of the year my convictions were strong so I approached Anne with my burden. It was hard for her but no real surprise for, being the godly woman she is, she had already heard the Lord's voice and was aware of the things He was doing in me. (Doesn't it annoy you when your wife knows what you are going to do even before you know it yourself!!)

We continued to pray until peace came, and in March 1979 I wrote to Mel, my District Superintendent, offering myself for whatever position he might consider suitable for me.