

"Everything Coming From God, Nothing Coming From Me"

A Brief History of Peninsula Bible Church

by Jim Stewart*

I. Introduction

"Everything coming from God and nothing coming from me" was a favorite statement of Ray Stedman. After hearing Elaine Stedman speak on February 28, 1995 about Ray's life and the history of PBC I have a much clearer understanding of why Ray liked to say this.

From the outset it was God who prepared the man, the men around him, the circumstances and the time. Ray and these men by just being faithful to the plan that God was setting forth in the scriptures were the Martin Luther's of their generation as they realized from God's word that the work of the formal church/pastors was not to bring people into the church to evangelize them but instead it was to equip the saints through expository preaching/teaching of the word and send them back out into the arenas of life (work, home, neighborhood) where they walked the rest of the week as ambassadors for Christ and ministers of a new covenant to do the real work of the ministry (Eph. 4:12-13). Forty-five years ago this was a revolutionary concept within the church and still is even today. In many ways it was our day equivalent of Martin Luther's revolution in the 16th century.

II. God Preparing The Man

In examining the early days it truly was God preparing the man, the men, the circumstances and the time. Following W.W.II after being involved in the Navigator's ministry in Hawaii, Ray returned to Montana. At this point married to Elaine, he decided to seek formal seminary education at Dallas Theological Seminary. As the prerequisites for attending this school included a Bachelor's degree, Ray with only an Associates degree had one strike against him. However, following the war a special exemption was made and Ray was able to apply. After applying Ray and Elaine waited and waited for a reply but none was forthwith in coming.

Undaunted Ray and Elaine, decided to go to Dallas to find out the reasons why Ray was not accepted. After arriving at Dallas Seminary, no one could even find Ray's application which it turned out had been lost when the Registrar's briefcase had been misplaced in Denver in which was contained Ray's application and papers. To make a long story short Ray was finally accepted and there with Elaine lived in the married quarters area with other couples that included the Howie (Howard) Hendricks and Don Campbell families. Over the Dallas Seminary years God was forging in Ray the vision that the Word of God was the centerpiece and by just unfolding what the Word said and by following those directions authentic New Testament Christianity could be a reality to any generation. For the formal church of Ray's day this was radical. By just wanting to wash the scriptures of the dirt and grime that had accumulated on them through their lack of use, Ray was being prepared by God for something special. However, while all their friends around them as graduation neared had obtained jobs and pastorates, Ray and Elaine were kept waiting as door after door of opportunity kept closing.

III. God Preparing The Men and The Place

At the same time God was preparing Ray in Dallas, God was preparing the circumstance and situation for Ray to walk into (Eph. 2:8-10). Some prominent Christian businessmen in the Palo Alto Bay Area led by Ed Stirm and Bob Smith had formed a group called Peninsula Bible Fellowship. The purpose of this group was to provide more in-depth bible study/teaching in addition to what PBF's attendees home churches were already providing and to make the Word of God available to a larger arena people who might not normally attend church.

IV. God Bringing The Man, The Men & The Place Together

During this time notable guest speakers passing through the Bay Area would also teach at PBF's meetings. These guests included such people as John Walvoord from Dallas Seminary, J. Vernon McGee from The Church of The Open Door in LA and J. Mitchell, one of the founders of Multnomah Bible College. It was evident to these men that PBF was growing and rapidly becoming a church and unbeknownst to each other each of these three men wrote a letter to the Director's of PBF recommending they consider calling Ray Stedman to become their first full-time teacher.

These three letters arrived on the same day at the same post box which made it very clear that Ray was their man! Bob Smith then while on a business trip to San Antonio stopped in Dallas to meet Ray for the first time. Within the first 30 minutes of this meeting they knew immediately that this was the match God had prepared. Soon thereafter upon Bob's return an offer was extended to Ray to become the Executive Secretary of PBF without mention of salary but with the promise that "all your needs would be met." Ray without ever having preached to or having met the attendees of PBF (or they him) accepted the offer and moved to Palo Alto with Elaine.

V. PBF To PBC

Upon arrival at Palo Alto, Ray's first message at PBF was on Ephesians 4:12-13. This verse was to be a main centerpiece of Ray's ministry as he felt so strongly as mentioned earlier that the work of the church/pastors was not to bring the unevangelized into the church to be evangelized but instead was to equip the saints through expository preaching for the real work of the ministry as ministers of a New Covenant in their everyday settings where they came in contact with so many more people. Not by design but in looking back, the initial years of Ray's ministry were spent in God preparing "home base - PBC" and in God making "broken vessels" that He could use for His purposes. During this time Ray like a rough diamond was being refined and smoothed, Ray's Jethro's (Bob Smith, Bob Roe and others) were being taught to teach, counsel and shepherd and the PBC Body was being fed the Word of God. The central precepts that flowed out of this biblical focus and application were:

- Expository preaching of the Word of God to help enable the Body to understand the complete counsel of God and see His majesty.
- Ministry belongs to the saints as each one is given a specific spiritual gift or gifts and is an integral member of the Body of Christ and a minister of the New Covenant ("Christ in you, the hope of glory"). The job of the pastors is to be "coaches" equipping the saints for the work of the ministry as ministers of this glorious New Covenant.
- The Lord Jesus Christ is Lord and Head of the Church and He is in control. It takes unanimity of leadership to seek the mind of the Lord in shepherding His Church. No one person is able to completely know the mind of the Lord (there are no popes!)..

On Elaine's side, her first reaction to the Bay Area upon arrival here was that she thought that their choice must have been in the flesh because everything was so beautiful, the schools were great and what a perfect place to raise a family. Little did Ray or Elaine realize how much this would change in a short period of time with the advent of the Vietnam War where this area was to become the focus of the anti-war/free-love movement and hippie culture. Over the years from 1950 till these turbulent years of the mid 60's/early 70's the truth which Ray/PBC had been expounding and taking root was to be tested. Would they really practice what the Lord had been teaching them? As Elaine Stedman said at the advent of these turbulent years it was if the Lord Jesus Christ himself was knocking at the doors of their hearts saying, "are you going to be self-righteous stuffy Palo Altoans or are you going to be obedient to the truth that I have taught you?"

After some soul searching PBC unlike many of the churches around them opened its doors to the Jesus movement which brought many "different" people to PBC to the exasperation of PBC's neighbors. From this

influx one result were the introduction of "Body Life" services on Sunday evenings where the PBC congregation was given the opportunity to praise God, share hurts/needs and really practice the agape love of Christ to other brothers and sisters in Christ who were in need and/or so "different." This "body life" which was nothing more than a return to authentic/radical Christianity seen in the 1st century church was in essence God's answer to the free love movement sweeping the country during this time. As a side note, about this time Ron Ritchie was brought on staff at PBC and led these Body Life services. Ron as the "non-conformist" was the perfect link between the mainstream church and these new Christians who were definitely "different."

Following these initial years after God had prepared "home-base/PBC" (by this time Dave Roper was on staff and preaching in Ray's absence to be later followed by others such as Steve Zeisler, Gary Vanderet, etc.) the PBC Elders felt Ray should be an Ambassador-to-the-Church-at-large so that more people/church leaders could see what "Authentic Christianity" was about and the possibilities for the church if God's model for man and for the church was followed (not PBC's model! - "When All Else Fails...Read The Directions" - Bob Smith). As a personal note, I will forever be indebted to the elders' decision to share Ray, as I was the recipient of God's grace through one of Ray's trips abroad to Indonesia in 1984 (I always marvel that God sent Ray to Indonesia not for the Indonesians but to find an American in Jakarta. What a sense of humor our God must have! How marvelous is His grace). On that trip Ray's and the other pastors' modeling of this authentic Christianity and the words spoken were so attractive that they showed me there was an alternative to the Christianity I had seen up to that point.

Paul Stevens, 1995 PBC Men's Retreat Speaker commenting to Brian Morgan at the retreat said that in his travels in meeting many Christian leaders the more power/influence a leader has in so many of those cases those same leaders have no intimacy in their marriages. Paul Stevens' idea of a Christian leader is someone who loves his wife, goes to his children's soccer games and when reaching the height of "fame" quietly steps off the stage without the slightest hesitation when it is time to retire. Finally in 1990 after 40 years of ministry when Ray had all fame at his grasp, modeling the humility and style of leadership evidenced throughout these years and consistent to the end Ray and Elaine stepped quietly off the stage and retired to Oregon to be with their children and grandchildren. What a contrast to so many of the Christian leaders of today who believe they are God's gift to the church and can never step down after becoming used to positions of influence and power!! Once again this just represented Ray's practice and understanding of authentic Christianity that he was just a broken vessel with God working in and through him and God would use others who understood this principle to do God's work after him (another former PBCer Dave Roper, Pastor now at Cole Community Church is doing the same thing as in 2 weeks he is quietly retiring and stepping off the stage there).

After being diagnosed with cancer, finally in October 1992 Ray went home to be with the Lord. During Ray's last days as Elaine was reading all the letters and messages that poured in expressing thanksgiving and praise to Ray for his life and ministry, Ray's response was genuine surprise and his response typical, "All I did was do what I was sent to do!"

VI. Looking Back

At the Memorial Service for Ray, Dave Roper reflecting on the secret of Ray's life and ministry told the story from 2 Kings 2 about Elijah and Elisha when Elijah was about to depart this life. Elijah asked Elisha, " Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken away from you?" Elisha replied, "Let a double portion of your spirit be upon me." To which Elijah answered, "You have asked a hard thing, nevertheless, if you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if not, it shall not be so." Then there appeared a chariot of fire and horses which picked Elijah up and took him away. Elisha saw it and cried out, "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen." Thus the hidden spiritual realities that Elijah believed in and that controlled everything he did now finally became a personal reality to Elisha. Once Elisha saw these realities he was a changed man. The point Dave Roper was making from this text was that we too must see this same chariot of fire and horses that have picked up our beloved Ray. By seeing and believing in these same heavenly invisible realities that Ray lived in we will then understand the secret to Ray's life and like Elisha be changed forever as well.

In closing, let us read Ray's own assessment of his ministry from a sermon he gave on 17 March 1985 at PBC from John 14:1-14.

"Thirty-five years ago I came as a pastor to Peninsula Bible Church. I didn't realize it at the time, but looking back now I must confess that I was motivated more by personal ambition than any other thing. I thought I was dedicated to the work of the Lord and to some degree I was. But on reflection I can see how much of it came from an urge to be a well-known pastor, to make a name as a Christian leader, to see an effective ministry begin with a great congregation. Through these 35 years, through much pain and struggle, those dreams have been fulfilled. But I want to tell you this; they do not mean very much to me right now! As I look back, what means more to me are the hundreds of lives that have been changed as people heard the Word of truth, right where you are sitting now. Homes have been revitalized, marriages have been restored, young people have turned from hurtful and destructive practices, such as drug addiction, alcoholic abuse, false doctrines, and led into purity, and righteousness. I think of the great number of printed messages that have gone out to the far corners of the earth, and the hundreds of letters that keep coming back telling of dramatic, life altering circumstances that have come out of reading these messages.

"I want to tell you that this is not my work, nor is it the work of anybody associated with us here, loyal and helpful as they have been. That is the work of Jesus, His mighty work, conducted from the throne of power at the right hand of the Majesty on high, carried out through the Spirit by means of willing men and women who saw themselves in the same relationship to Him as he is to the Father, "You in me and I in you." That is the greatest truth in the Bible. How ignorant the world is of this! It is by far the greatest, most magnificent miracle that has ever taken place on this planet - this mighty work of reaching, changing, healing and restoring. Yet the world sees nothing of the magnificence of what is happening here and in other places like this. But we know! This is what ought to lead us to give thanks to God, to joy in the ministry that He has given us, you and I alike. Let us carry on in His name."

Author's Note:

Some of these points are from former elder Bob Roe, the 10 Year Celebration Service of PBCC, personal gleanings from 6 years at PBC, Ray's sermon on John 14:1-14 and the attachments following. However, Elaine's talk on 2/28/95 filled in many gaps to the story and the main point that Elaine left me with was, "Be radical enough!" Translated by Bob Roe, this means "Be obedient to your Lord."

*Jim Stewart and his family are currently active at Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino (PCCC).

August 16, 1996

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