

Calvary Temple. Attendance increased and by the time *Decision* singled the church out as one of America's "great" churches, it seemed nothing could stand in the way of Blair's dreams.

These dreams were big. Bigger than big. He dreamed of a retirement center specializing in medical help for the aging. Then there was the purchase of the "Polo Grounds"—42 acres of prime property. The formation of the Charles E. Blair Foundation. They borrowed money. Lots of it. Then they entered into heavy promotional fund raising.

But the funds ran out before things really got started. An investigation by the Securities Exchange Commission (SEC) turned up ample evidence to accuse both Blair and his financial advisor, Wendell Nance, of fraud. They had failed to give a prospectus to 18 investors.

By the time the trials were over, the church was in Chapter 11—a nice name for bankruptcy. The *Denver Post* suggested Blair should "stick to preaching and stay out of the securities business." And one of the jurors who had helped convict Blair was quoted in the paper saying: "Maybe ambition got in the way of his (Blair's) common sense."

Deeply repentant, Blair went before his congregation and confessed that ambition had indeed blinded him from God's way. It was a crushing time—the entire church shared in the blame. They, too, had caught Blair's dream of being the biggest everything. There was nothing to do but throw themselves on the mercy of God—and the court.

However, instead of sentencing Blair to what could have been 51 years in prison, the judge placed him on five years' probation. "I am satisfied that the only way the creditors can hope to be repaid is if Blair remains at the helm of Calvary Temple."

What has happened since then can best be summed up in the words of a member of the church, Joanne Meusburger.

There was nothing to do but throw themselves on the mercy of God—and the court.

"Today the church has not only survived, but is thriving. The same pastor remains. The members have paid off the huge debt.

"The headlines have been told and retold, and John and Elizabeth Sherrill in their book, *The Man Who Could Do No Wrong* (Chosen Books 1981) beautifully told the Blairs' personal story. (Note: All royalties from the sale of the book have been donated to Calvary Temple for the purpose of reducing debt.) What needs to be understood now is the uplifting picture of a people and a pastor who were humbled but not defeated, the agape love of God that allowed individuals to question but not turn aside, and the growth that resulted as this church learned to care about each other as a family of God."

Joanne Meusburger adds: "A new vision has emerged. No longer is it important to be the biggest church in Denver or the best known. Now Calvary Temple is content with being the family of God."

Blair has stated that the church's goal is to "demonstrate through the miracle of love that Jesus is Lord. Our church family had basically the same needs as the individual family—the needs of acceptance, protection, a place to find help, a haven in the times of stress, someone to help us face the issues of life, a place where we can experience togetherness, and an opportunity to care and share with

Continued

The page one headlines in *The Denver Post* told the story about Blair's conviction in 1976.





others of like faith."

Although Calvary Temple lost some members when the going got rough, they have climbed back to 13,500 members and communicants.

"God worked in spite of the crisis because of the stability of the church," Blair says. "We have only seven chairmen of the board and five are still serving: one just rotated off but is still here and one left in the crisis. The consistency of the constituency has been the big thing. We have solid people who have held steady."

"Even though we are debtors," Blair states in the book, "we live in an atmosphere of freedom from debt. It is the special, treasured inheritance of the Christian that he does not have to be infallible. He only has to know the love of the infallible God."

Churches and individuals around the nation who learned of Calvary's problems stepped forward to help. Jim Bakker was so moved when he read the Sherrills' book, he invited Blair to appear on "The PTL Club" and gave him \$100,000 on the air. He begged his viewers to send money also.

The final debt payment was made September 19, 1983.

"After coming out of this eight-year crisis," Blair says, "the major problem is, where do we go from here, as it relates to reaching the city for Christ? Do we enlarge, look for a new location? The problem is unique because we're coming out of a long famine. This is a new beginning for us."

"The crisis will affect some people's lives forever," observes Harvey Rohdig, layman and now in his third year of a three-year term on the board of directors. "Some people are willing to put it behind them; it did hurt our numbers," he says, "but they seem to be coming back. I think from a ministry standpoint we have to learn how to overcome some of those hurts from the past."

Mike Kelliher, associate pastor at Calvary Temple for six years and a veteran of the staff, believes that "the hope for the church is in its new blood. When we interview new members, we stress the need for them to become involved and find out what God has for them."

Rohdig sees the church "as a driving, motivating force in the community—one that wants to reach out not only in the spiritual sense of building up the kingdom, but to people in need."

Calvary Temple also seeks to teach God's Word and promote education through a Christian school. The church

**'We have
to learn how to
overcome some
of those
hurts from the
past.'**

operates the Colorado Christian School across the street and includes grades one through six. Grades seven through twelve were dropped during the bankruptcy troubles but the school hopes to offer those grades again.

Rohdig adds that the church "certainly reaches out in propagating the gospel in missionary work" and considers it "a lighthouse with a burning desire to reach people for Christ."

From his position as associate pastor, Kelliher sees a deep sense of worship evolving in the church. "We spend a lot of time lifting up the Lord through prayer and song: not to the exclusion of the Word, but not to the exclusion of worship either. What is evolving is a heightened sense of responsibility for the lost. The closer we get to Him, the more He touches our hearts and gives us a burden for those who aren't saved—and not just in witnessing," he adds, but in "helping the whole man, body and soul."

Pastor Blair notes that in a week's time the church ministers to 10,000 of the 13,500 people through worship, enrollment in Bible studies and attendance at church and its various age-interest groups.

He also estimates he spends one-third of his time ministering to other pastors, and 75 percent of that time to Third World pastors with Charismatic affiliations. He travels extensively and serves on the executive board of Dr. Paul Yonggi Cho's Church Growth International and the ministry board of Morris Cerullo's World Evangelism Inc.

Blair states that "while paying the debt, we maintained our missions work by supporting 160 missionaries around the world. I believe that's one reason we survived. We didn't become ingrown and selfish."

Blair believes the crisis has strengthened the church. "We all have an image of ourselves, often forced on us by success or failure, or what others think of us. The *Denver Post* wrote a profile many years ago of me called 'The Man

Continued

Who Could Do No Wrong' (from which the book title was taken). I started believing that, and changed from a person to a personage. A personage is an assumed character.

"If I learned anything in the crisis, it's to keep sensitive to what God wants me to do, and when and how He wants me to do it. I'm still dreaming big dreams, but the dreams must be done, both in timing and method, in His will."

Calvary Temple appears to be remaining true to that vision. At present, it is having a dynamic influence on the city of Denver as a body of people who have proved they can emerge from the furnace of affliction refined as gold.

Lessons to be Learned

What are the lessons other churches—other Christians—should learn from the experience of Charles Blair and Calvary Temple?

The Sherrills' book closes with a brief chapter called "Lessons in Listening." It is advice to others in spiritual leadership on how to keep out of trouble. The chapter begins with Blair stating, "I don't believe that God has us go through either success or failure for ourselves alone. My experience happened to come through attempting to build a geriatric center, but the things I learned could apply equally

**'I'm still dreaming
big dreams,
but the dreams
must be done in
His will.'**

well to anyone in the act of building: a young couple building a home, a career woman getting started, the officer of an organization. All of us are in the process of creating. All of us can face some variation of the temptations which beckoned me."

Blair then lists what he calls his "hearing aids," items which he uses to check himself whenever he begins a project.

Test the spirit behind your dreams.

Blair admits he is still confused as to whether his original vision for Life Center came from God or from his own ego. Although he felt it was from God, he is now able to look back and realize there were persistent Christian voices which challenged him at every step. Hindsight now indicates he should have listened to those voices, if not in concept

at least in the method he used to bring the dream to pass.

It is at this point, it seems, that many churches and parachurch ministries begin to fall short. Blair asks if the "dream" was merely an extension of his own ego. The line between selfish ego and God's promise to give us the "desires of our heart" is often almost indistinguishable.

Some accused Oral Roberts of being on an "ego trip" when he called his new university Oral Roberts University.

The same accusations were leveled at Jim Bakker when he changed the name of the television program "The PTL Club" to "The Jim Bakker Show."

And hundreds of evangelists, from Billy Graham to Morris Cerullo, have incorporated their evangelistic ministries under their own name: i.e., "The I.M. Somebody Evangelistic Association."

Ego? Or God?

Blair has no answers for this. But it is noteworthy that one of the corporations which got him into trouble was the Charles E. Blair Foundation.

Several years ago the pastor of a large Pentecostal church was forced to resign his pulpit after confessing to several long-term extra-marital affairs. Later his elders put the blame not on his moral weakness—but on his ego. "He totally

Continued

separated himself from those of us who wanted to be his advisors," one man said. "It was as though he felt he was bigger than us. He would not allow any staff member to call him by his first name. Many of us feared the entire multi-million dollar church program was primarily an extension of his own ego. It was frightening."

That church, like Denver's Calvary Temple, has survived the crisis surrounding the pastor's public announcement and subsequent resignation. The church, while no longer in the limelight as it was under the brilliant personality of the former pastor, is making steady, but much quieter, progress.

Unity between husband and wife.

Charles Blair said the primary person to question his dream was his wife, Betty. "We were not in accord," he confesses.

"Today," he says as he looks back on those days of affliction, "I would not dare violate the injunction of Ephesians 5:21, that we be submitted one to another."

Blair says he never really prayed through with his wife until they were of one heart and mind. He knew, all along, that his wife was not in agreement. Yet he forged ahead anyway, determined.

Although there are wives whose own ambition allows them to become as deceived as their husbands, they seem to be the exception rather than the rule. In most cases where pastors or other church leaders lead their churches into the furnace of affliction, the wife usually had discernment of the mistakes being made. However, blind submission, fear of being rejected or an unwillingness to speak out for fear her husband might lose face often causes the wife not only to go along publicly with the scheme, but keep her from strongly objecting and expressing her misgivings to her husband.

Blair says his wife, Betty, "objected with gentleness, because this is her nature." Perhaps if she had mounted a soapbox, or objected with uncharacteristic "violence," both Blair and the church could have been spared much misery. Yet, even had she been able to stem the downward rush of her husband's determination, this would not have broken his proud and ambitious spirit. It took radical measures—such as those imposed by the court—to bring this to pass.

The lesson learned: now neither pastor nor wife ventures out until both are in accord.

Seek a body of spiritual peers.

Blair is unequivocal in stating that the protection a husband and wife provide each other can be extended (or supplied,

**If the leader
is like most men,
he needs
others to confirm
he is hearing
from God.**

for the unmarried) by "entering into relationship with a small group of men and women committed to lift one another regularly to the throne of grace." Such a group not only provides encouragement and support, but when it is needed—correction.

In looking at the leadership structure of the "old" Calvary Temple, one does not find the top leaders in such a relationship. Those surrounding Blair, Nance and others operated in "official" capacities, but were not in the kind of covenant relationship which allowed them to "speak the truth in love." Even more important, there did not seem to be the kind of submission on the part of Blair and the others to receive such correction, even had it been spoken.

This is a common mistake made by many contemporary church leaders. The men they have around them serve on official boards: deacons, elders, staff, personnel committees, pastoral relations committees, etc. Or they are in submission to some extra-local authority: a bishop, district superintendent, out-of-town overseer, or even with an apostolic ministry. In churches that boast of congregational authority the pastor may have no one to whom he answers except the treasurer or whoever controls the finances. Or he may be in the position of the leader of one of the nation's largest parachurch ministries who last year when asked "To whom do you submit?" answered boldly, "I submit to Christ."

That is the perfect answer as long as he has no sin in his heart which will distort the words of Christ. But if the leader is like most men, then he needs others around him who will confirm whether the word he is hearing actually comes from God, or whether it comes from some other source such as self or even the devil. He also needs to be in a relationship of voluntary submission to some group—a home church, a group of elders or some friends or pastoral advisors who will unflinchingly speak the truth in love.

Four years ago a group of local pastors approached the pastor of a large

Continued

Pentecostal church in a western city, offering to bring him into their circle of friendship. When he asked what would be required, they told him they were meeting weekly to "check each other out" to make certain their individual dreams were in concert with the will of God. The pastor refused to become part of such a group, saying they would not understand his vision and would in all probability curtail his plans to build a huge church complex

Last year the church went into bankruptcy and the partially completed building was sold at public auction.

Make certain your co-workers are more than an extension of yourself.

According to Blair, "If I am called to leadership and find helpers who are simply echoes of myself, I double my strengths but I also double my weaknesses."

A tragic illustration can be found in several churches around the nation where an overly ambitious pastor has not only hired people who magnify his own faults, but turned over too much responsibility to staff members who later prove to be unscrupulous or dishonest.

Here is what usually happens. A pastor who is a dynamic, personable leader will take over a small church or found his own church and see it begin to grow. Attendance will soar, and so will the pastor's ego. He begins to make plans for "bigger and better" ministries. Perhaps he has a vision for a college, a TV station, a magazine or perhaps all the above and more. As these ministries emerge and as the congregation grows, the amount of work tends to grow exponentially. Soon the pastor will be on the verge of burn-out. Often he will also discover that it takes more than a vision to maintain a successful ministry after it has grown—it takes organizational and administrative

**'If I find helpers
who are echoes
of myself, I double
my strengths but
also my weaknesses.'**

skills—which he may not have.

Then, just as the pastor feels overburdened with the growth of the church, a person will emerge who seems the answer to the pastor's need for strong administrative skills. This may be a layman in the church—a businessman who has been active in the ministry. Usually he will be considered a good businessman by members of the congregation. But if the truth is really known, he is probably a mediocre businessman who isn't really making it in the business community and is looking for a change. The nice positive environment of a church with its tremendous cash flow appeals.

This person will be very supportive of the pastor—sometimes lavishing him with expensive gifts and praising him at every turn. The pastor knows the man is loyal and he gives up financial oversight to him. At this point we have a situation where a dishonest person can rip off the church. And it has happened in several cases.

One church we know of ended up with the church administrator being charged in court with embezzling thousands of dollars and later acquitted of that charge. The resulting publicity and humiliation forced the pastor to resign even though he wasn't personally responsible. The good name of the church became a byword in the community, and the large,



growing congregation was scattered to the four winds. Only a few hundred loyal people remained to pick up the pieces and carry on. It may take years for the hurts caused by that situation to heal.

Charles Blair points out that co-workers should be not an extension, but a completion of the leader.

Spend more time storming heaven than you do reasoning.

In his book Blair states: "When time is short, the most important way we can use it is in prayer."

He was paraphrasing Martin Luther who once said, "When I am faced with an unusually busy day I rise two hours early—so I can pray twice as long as usual."

According to a recent survey 62 percent of the leaders of various national ministries confessed (anonymously, incidentally) that their "quiet time" amounted to less than 30 minutes a week. Such men, it is assumed, rely on their own logic and try to hear God "on the run."

Blair points out one of the painful lessons he learned in the furnace of affliction was: "In any crisis there comes a time when human logic is worthless. Then we need the tools which are available to us as children of God. More-than-usual *doing* must be balanced with more-than-usual *praying*."

Don't move until you have a clear directive from God.

In looking back on the problems which occurred at Calvary Temple, Blair confesses: "I simply couldn't wait. Today I have committed myself to a new route: when my timing is thwarted I will divert my restlessness to prayer and do nothing until I have a clear directive from God, confirmed by the body. Then we will put our feet where He has trod."

Obviously one of the major problems confronting today's contemporary ministries is haste. Haste and impatience. Too many leaders want to move whether the cloud of God's anointing is moving or not. As a result they often miss God's timing—believing that simply because they have heard a word saying "go," it means "go now," rather than after God has done some additional work.

Catching God's vision is only half the battle.

The pastor of a church that later got into trouble used to speak of "his vision." In fact, this vision was revised periodically and printed out so people could get behind it and support it. That vision was basically for things—bigger buildings, a TV station, establishing more churches, buying more businesses.

**'When I am
faced with an unusually
busy day, I rise
two hours early—so
I can pray
twice as long as
usual.'**

The ultimate goal of the vision was evangelistic, to reach as many people as possible. But the vision became unrealistic, and the people served the vision rather than the vision serving the people.

Charles Blair addresses this when he says that while catching God's vision is half the battle, the other half is discovering His means for bringing it about. "We know His objectives by revelation," he writes. "The battle plan will have to come by revelation, too."

Beware of prior successes.

Faith is always progressive—like God's revelation. Moses struck the rock with his staff and water gushed out. But when he tried to provide water the same way a second time, God reproved him.

Commenting on this, Blair recounts: "At Calvary Temple we mixed fund raising with borrowing, successfully. At Life Center we repeated this mix—to our sorrow. We weren't allowing God to take us another step in discipleship."

Walk in faith, not presumption.

Charles Blair says he made the mistake of having faith in faith. He tried to "believe" his way through every difficulty, not stopping to realize that some of the obstacles—like those which reared themselves before Balaam—could have come from God.

Now, in summing it all up, he says: "What God calls us to is faith in Him—and Him alone. I have to be certain that I am believing in God, and not in my own will power."

The Sherrills close out their book, quoting Blair.

"There are three things to listen for: *The Dream. The Method. The Timing.* We must hear His voice on all three. And that can occur only through much listening. We did this naturally as we were building Calvary Temple. But by the time Life Center came along we were pretty successful, and certainly we were busy. We just did not take the scores, the hundreds of hours necessary to ask:

"Is the dream *His* vision?

"Is the method *His* way?

"Is the timing *His* moment?"