

FREEING THE CAPTIVE AND THE CAPTIVE CHURCH

John M. Perkins*

Understanding Signs of the Times—Cultural Captivity

This whole week has been a fulfillment of a dream that I began to dream in the early 1990s.¹ I began to dream of what I wanted to do as I moved into my 60s. I began to dream about what I would like to do with the end of my life—the last days of my life. And since I am an amateur historian (a historian is someone who tries to understand the times that they live in and then record their observations) and have had so many people working with me, I have been able to record not only the times but also my own reflections on our own efforts to make some impact in those times. Generally, one does not become an authentic historian until about 50 years after one is dead; that is when people begin to recognize that one truly understood the times in which one lived.

That is what makes me feel so good about my book, *Let Justice Roll Down*.² I wrote it about 30 years ago, and I have sold a few copies here and there over the years. Then I discovered that after 30 years it has become the fourteenth most impactful book on Evangelicalism in America! It is sort of affirming to know that people have come to recognize that I interpreted the times based on factual reality. It is delightful.

I want to share with you what I have learned during my 40 years of ministry, or 50 years of ministry. I want to continue to share that for the remainder of my life. And what a privilege it is to share this in a college, in a seminary, and all around town in different settings and to be able to do that four or five times a week somewhere in the USA.

It is a privilege to be here with you who are getting at the real failure in our society. Prisons themselves are our failure. We are not doing anything courageous when we are going to prison. The church was to be salt and light in this world. Jesus said, “I am the way” and we follow him, and “he that follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” We are here today dealing with the real problems in our society.

* John M. Perkins is President of the John M. Perkins Foundation for Reconciliation and Development, 1831 Robinson Street, Jackson, MS 39209; jmpfoffice@comcast.net.

1. This essay is based on a presentation given in April 2007 at a conference entitled “Free the Captive: Removing the Offense to the Ex-Offender” under the sponsorship of The Institute for the Theology of Culture: New Wine, New Wineskins of Multnomah Biblical Seminary in Portland, Oregon.

2. John M. Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1976).

When we talk about freeing the captive from behind prison bars, we are also talking about freeing ourselves. The prisoners behind literal bars are just a reflection of our own spiritual captivity; a reflection of our own failure to be salt and light in the world. God never intended in his kingdom that there were to be prisons. It was not an Old Testament thought to have prisons. And when he talks, he talks about freeing the prisoner—“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for He has anointed me ... to free the captives.” True religion, in the end time, is going to be: “Did you visit me in prison? Were you concerned about the prisoners?” We are here dealing with our own failures! And we are here to free ourselves—from our own captivity.

That captivity is a captivity to our materialistic culture! We have the resources, but we are captive to our own selfishness. We are captive to our own individualism. We are captive to our own meanings in life, our own jobs—we are captive to culture. The end of captivity is how we behave sexually in our society. As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be in the days of the coming of the Lord. What was the characteristic of Noah’s days? It was sexual immorality. It was sexual irresponsibility in our society. What is all this news about now? Bin Laden—Bin Laden wants bodies covered up and we want them exposed. That is what it is about. We are captive to our materialistic and hedonistic culture.

How do we deal with that? We have heard how some people deal with it programmatically. I have named my prison ministry “Inside Out.” We found out that our young people who we work with in our clubs do not go to prison. Children who go to Sunday school generally do not go to prison. So we understand the problem as well as the solution. We have to go in there and affirm their dignity. We must recognize that these are people who came from our community, who were created in the image of God. We must bring them back to our community, surrounding them with love and teaching them responsibility. We must find them jobs right away, right away in society. And we must provide them with some housing, places for them to live, and move them toward places of responsibility in our society. But the real problem is that the church is indifferent. We do not see it as our failure.

The Church’s Cultural Captivity

Instead of seeing it as our failure, we see it as the failure of certain individuals. But these people are captive to the culture just as we are captive to the culture. Now, in our church, we have overlaid that with prosperity theology. Get God now, and get rich. Get God and pray to him that he will get you what you need in life.

I am going to do a Bible study on how we can deal with what is broken about us. If you have your Bibles, go to Psalm 11. We are going to deal with what is broken. What I want to do is attack the culture that has captured us. We want to move beyond the symptoms. If we simply keep on developing programs that take care of symptoms, those programs themselves will become crutches and we will

become co-victims with the victims. We call that co-dependence. It means that we consider ourselves to be helping the victim, and yet in reality we are furthering victimization. It is similar to our government's answer to drug addiction; just give them some methadone. Just give them a little bit more of the drugs they need—to keep them functioning. Many of the programs that we have developed are nothing but programs—the church is really becoming a huge, huge, Alcoholics Anonymous program. One never gets healed; all we do is keep coming together with no solution in sight. And one loses all of one's time working on oneself. That's what Alcoholics Anonymous is. Now, don't get me wrong. I like AA. One positive thing about AA is that one gets love there. But the people in AA are not really too engaged with society because they are too engaged with themselves. They are not really healed. Jesus has become their "eternal therapist." The truth is that Jesus wants us to be workers together with Him. We need to be well. We need to be made whole. We need to take up our beds and walk in our society. The church has become a huge AA plantation and has all these people on it using up all of their time working on themselves and are not really engaged in being salt and light in the world. We want to go further than that. I want to get you further along than that. I'm trying to get you beyond that victimization so we can see the problem in society and we can become a part of that healing process. So, let us look at Psalm 11. Let me read it to you and then give you a talk.

The Foundations Are Being Destroyed

¹ In the LORD put I my trust: how say ye to my soul, Flee as a bird to your mountain? ² For, lo, the wicked bend *their* bow, they make ready their arrow upon the string, that they may privily shoot at the upright in heart. ³ If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do? ⁴ The LORD *is* in his holy temple, the LORD'S throne *is* in heaven: his eyes behold, his eyelids try, the children of men. ⁵ The LORD trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth. ⁶ Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and an horrible tempest: *this shall be* the portion of their cup. ⁷ For the righteous LORD loveth righteousness; his countenance doth behold the upright (Psalm 11, KJV).

A theme here is, "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" We have foundational problems that are creating the symptoms that we are addressing. What we want to do here is dig down to the foundations and find what is causing the cracks in the building—cracks that we are caulking with our programs. Most of these programs are caulking these cracks, but the cracks are going to continue to get bigger because the problem is at the foundations of the society. We have to dig down to the foundation so that we can fix it; otherwise, we are going to use all of our energy just caulking the society. Jesus tells us, "The wise man built his house upon the rock." What we're dealing with, then, are foundational problems.

Let me give you the background to this Psalm. It reflects David's problems in the same way our problems are being reflected. David's problem here is a family problem. The time was when David's son, Absalom, had undermined David's leadership and had stolen the popularity of the nation; and he set up his headquarters as the king in Hebron. And all of his troops were on their way to Jerusalem to kill his father and his family, so that he alone would be king and his heirs alone would make up the kingly line. You can hear the upheaval in the Psalm as David is fleeing from his own son. People gathered around him as he was fleeing the city—his friends and his enemies alike. Some were cheering him on and bringing him food to help him while others were walking along cursing him saying, "You brought this on yourself." So David, the great king, is fleeing the city through the back door, confronted by imminent political ruin, the embarrassment of his failure as a father, and the shame of his broken family. It was David's sin that ended up breaking apart his family. And so he is fleeing. His friends said, "David, why don't you flee to the mountain? Flee to the mountain and stay there for a few months. Then we'll come and join you and we can come back to Jerusalem to reestablish your kingdom." Remember, David had been this great mountain general. He developed his skills in the mountain when he was running from Saul. He gathered around him people—the poor, the despised, and those in debt; he took them and molded them into the greatest fighting force this world has ever known—his mighty men.

Family and Community as the Social Foundations

We need to clean up our act in our society. It is all about sex in our society. That is the way it was in the days of Noah. That was the way it was in the days of Sodom. Sexual immorality is a reflection of our deterioration, the end of greed and power in our society. We have commercialized sex. We cannot sell our products without having naked women posing next to them. We cannot have a ball game without these girls parading themselves around.

The foundations are being destroyed. What are the foundations of society? They are the family and the surrounding community. I am talking about solutions. I am talking about what has worked down through the centuries. Great people come from great nurturing by mothers and fathers in families. God created the family to be the first nurturing institution. In the community that I live in, 84% of children are being raised without an intact family. When you get to the prisons, 90% come from those homes that are broken. So it is a crisis. The family is broken. David's family is giving him trouble.

The second foundation stone is the community. The greatest Christian value is not an individual value, but a community value. "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Am I my brother's keeper?" asked Cain when he killed his brother. Yes, we are responsible! God gave the creation to Adam for us to manage it and care for it. God created us to live in community. Families and villages have served as the

social networks for people throughout the ages. Now we are trying to change the definition of the family in order to fit our personal preferences. The family and community at large are eroding.

So we have two broken entities in our communities. That is what we have to rebuild. That is why I am giving my life for these two things—family development and community development.

The Task of the Righteous

When we do holistic community development, we impact the family for good. The church is supposed to be the community of God's people. It is supposed to be the family of God here on earth. The church today has become a commuter institution. It has very little to do with where you live. Churches are being built along freeways. What are people going there for? Who do they go back to? The church has lost its parish. It is made up of people who are concerned about their individualism. They are individual survivors. They think that they can be Christ-followers individually here on earth. However, that is not a biblical thought. Romans 12 and First Corinthians 12 explain that clearly. We are the Body of Christ and members in particular. Such individualism is carried over to our understanding of Scripture as well. We have made the Bible our devotional book, but not our textbook for living. It is supposed to be both. That is how we are to live: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the men and women of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17; NASB). It is our textbook for life! But we have reduced it to being simply a devotional book whose sole purpose is to help me as a religious consumer.

So now we know what is broken. David asks, "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" The foundations are the family and the community. Now the Psalmist shifts to the responsibility of the righteous. Who are the righteous? The letter is written to the righteous. God is looking after the righteous. "... him that loveth violence his soul hateth.... For the righteous LORD loveth righteousness" (Psalm 11:5, 7; KJV).

He is putting the responsibility in the hands of the righteous. Who are the righteous? When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do? God is expecting the righteous to do his work in the world, and the church should be made up of his righteous people. So, who are the righteous?

The righteous are those people who recognize the fact that they do not have any righteousness of their own. They repent of that and turn over their lives to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ himself becomes our righteousness. Then we put on the Lord Jesus Christ. In the Bible, the righteous one is the prodigal son, not the boy who

stayed home. It is the one who went off and discovered that his life was messed up. He then came home and his father put on him the righteous robe and gave him the ring and made him responsible for running the farm. The righteous are those who have repented of their sin and have given their lives to Jesus Christ. Instead of working for their own gain, they take the responsibility to work for the people of God—working for those who are broken in society. That is what the righteous are like.

Rebuilding the Foundations

We know what is wrong. Now, what can we do? We need to rebuild the foundations. We want to rebuild the foundations so we can build the house on solid ground.

What can we do? Let me suggest five things that the righteous can do. It is important to keep in mind that you will find the solution when you start the process. Most of you want me to tell you the process; and if I do not tell you the process you are not going to start. But you will not find the solution until you start the process. God leads us and guides us into truth. You do not come upon all truth when you get a vision. You find the truth when you obey God and start the process. When you start on God's path, you will find that the Lord will lead you and you will discover the process. Then you will find the solution. And the agony of the pain will help you find the solution. Let us ask then, "What can the righteous do?" Here are five things the righteous can do.

1. Reestablish Truth. Truth today is situational. Someone has said that I have nerve to claim that there is truth. Yes, there is Absolute Truth. It is Jesus Christ, the creator of the world. He said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." So we need truth. Where can you find truth? In the Word of God. Why do you need it? So you can believe it and act upon it. It is not sufficient simply to hear the word; you have to act upon it. Where does faith come from? The Word of God. So then, "faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." We must return to the Word of God. We must return to the Bible. Our trouble with Islam is that they are operating from a book—the Qur'an. We are operating by folklore. We are operating on what someone else said about God. They are talking about the Qur'an and we are talking about what someone else said about God. We do not quite know God ourselves. The great truth about Christianity is that you can know God. And knowing God means that you are born again. Now you have the Holy Spirit to teach you so that you can be disciplined in grace. And so, number one, you have the Word of God.

In the South, the white folks have had the Word of God as a devotional book. Black folks have had the Word of God as an emotional book. They have not had the Word of God in terms of obedience to it. We thus have ended up with a kind of foolishness of racism and bigotry. We have ended up with what we call a

white church and a black church and a church based on race. Racism and bigotry minimize the gospel.

We live in such a state of foolishness that we do not have an impact on society, for we have accepted an inferior gospel. We have accepted a gospel based on homogeneity—which does not reflect the kingdom at all. Whenever you look at the kingdom revealed in Scripture, you find that every race, tribe, and ethnic group is serving God together in heaven. And he told us to make sure that what we are doing as his kingdom community here on earth reflects what is going on in heaven.

Racism is foolishness—a contradiction of truth. It has no basis in truth. There is not one attribute of God that resonates with racism. Still, we insist on toying around with it. We are looking for an excuse to have a black church and a white church. Why are churches segregated? Black folks like loud music. White folks like soft music. We are music lovers and we have put our music over loving God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and all our strength, and loving those who are different from ourselves in our society. We need to build our lives on gospel truth, not on personal preference and folklore. We also need to pray. This is the second thing.

2. *Learn how to pray again.* “Name it and claim it” people have hijacked prayer. Our prayer should be, “Lord, what would you have me to do?” instead of “O say can you see what’s in it for me?” Real prayer is this: “Your kingdom come.” Real prayer is, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Real prayer is, “Lord, what would you have me to do?” So, we must “de-hijack” prayer. We must teach people to pray again—to pray that we would be that kind of kingdom community that breaks down divisions between people groups and that overcomes our fallen attempts to colonize the gospel. Here we come to the third thing.

3. *De-colonize the Gospel.* We preach a gospel that accomplished colonization in our society. Malcolm X and others were right: we got the Africans and the blacks to look to heaven while the white folks colonized the earth.

In my own lifetime, I have seen people of color around the world who have reclaimed their land from missionaries. The last place was South Africa. There is something wrong with our gospel. There is something fundamentally wrong in our society. And so we must de-colonize the gospel. We must release the gospel—we must preach a gospel that crosses racial and social barriers—where Jesus becomes more important than my own self interests, where the power of the gospel is released into the lives of the people, and the world can know we are Christians because of the love we have one for another.

You might be surprised to hear this, but I like the day in which we are living. We are living in a day before the war on terrorism is over. People must think about what we are going to do when the war is over. We cannot go back. Once people are freed from slavery, you cannot enslave them again. I hear Dr. Dobson and all those

good people say, “Let’s go back to religion like it was in the days of our founding fathers.” I say, “I do not want to go back to the religion of your founding fathers. I’d be a slave! Are you crazy?”

This is a great day in which we are living. This is a most opportune time! This is a time when we can come together and solve some of the most pressing problems in our society. It is going to take us working together to do it. We must become the church. We have got to be one. We must answer Jesus’ prayer, “That they may be one.”

Don’t tell me what white folks like. Don’t tell me what black folks like. Don’t tell me about Spanish language stuff. Jesus took care of all that at Pentecost. He broke the language barriers at Pentecost. We have to get rid of all these superficial excuses and start obeying God. We have to stop trying to colonize the gospel; if we don’t, we will continue to perpetuate the enslavement of people. For when we are not breaking down divisions between our various groups, we are actually building those walls; and when the dominant culture fails to work with minority communities in righting the wrongs from the past, they facilitate the perpetuation of those problems in the present. And the enslavement of people groups in the past in view of the colonized gospel fosters the captivation of those same people groups in the present. We, the church, must become missional—moving beyond divisions and breaking them down. This is the fourth thing.

4. *The church must become missional.* The church must be the driving force in society. I was on Prison Fellowship’s board from the beginning, and served on the board for 16 years. I also have a prison ministry, and I go to prisons all the time. The ones that rehabilitate prisoners are the ones where the church is established within their walls. The church must be the driving force behind changes in culture. We must be a worshiping, nurturing community that empowers people to move forward with dignity. We need to establish the church inside prisons, and take the prisoners into our hearts even when we are outside those prison walls.

This is what happened to Chuck Colson. He joined a group; it was a church inside his prison. The pastor of that church challenged him when he left prison. As Chuck was saying “Good-bye guys, I’ll see you,” the man who had discipled him—this big black guy—says, “You are just like all of the white big shots.” “I watched you come here and go, and you gonna forget about us.” As a result, Chuck said that every night as he lay down to go to sleep he would see this big guy who had discipled him saying, “You’re not coming back.” Chuck couldn’t get it out of his head, so he finally said, “I’m going back, I’m going back.”

You should visit Lawndale Community in Chicago. They have what they call Hope House. They keep about 50 men in that Hope House, all recovering from prison and from drugs. They have created business enterprises for those young people. They have a pizzeria. They have a construction business building fences in that

neighborhood. These former offenders are working, and there is a wedding in the church every month because these young men are getting themselves together. They are getting married to these lonely black women who find it so hard to have a husband in that community.

And so, we must develop the church—a worshiping, nurturing community that has no walls. No para-church organization is a substitute for the local church. If your church is not doing anything, go out and start another one. Much of church growth today is a result of people going from one bad church to another with what they call a charismatic leader. And what you have is just huge church swapping. I encourage you to go out and get five or six other people together and start a church in the midst of a community, and you'll see that community's problems begin to disappear; this is already happening in some communities right here in Portland. Such a move will require that you develop an effective philosophy of ministry. This brings us to the fifth point.

5. *Develop a philosophy of ministry.* In fact, that philosophy of ministry needs to give special attention to the youth. Most of us do not have a good plan. In my neighborhood, we just have church every Sunday. They have churches there with 300–400 members and do not have one youth worker. And the prisons are full. The juvenile hall is full. And the only staff members they have are a pastor, a part-time musician, and a part-time secretary. They do not have anything directed toward the problem. And the problem is how we might nurture the young people in the neighborhood. The first person you ought to have as a full-time employee is a youth worker. Let the pastor stay on part-time until after you have hired a youth worker full-time.

In the church I started, we have two full-time youth workers. If you come to Jackson, Mississippi, you are going to find the Voice of Calvary Ministry, the Voice of Calvary Church, and the John M. Perkins Foundation. What is our focus? The youth. The youth. The youth. We are focusing our ministry energy on the youth; and as a result of reaching the youth, we reach their parents and grandparents, and we reach out and bring stability to the society at large.

Making a Difference

The foundations are being destroyed. We can do better. We can make a difference. We must create new wineskin communities that contain the new wine of the missional gospel. We should be building churches that minister to those held captive behind bars and on the streets. I would never be a part of a church that would not help me do what I need to do for these people. In my church, they help me minister to the oppressed. Is your church helping you spend your resources on those held captive in prisons behind iron bars, or is your church spiritually enslaved to the prosperity gospel that preaches about what's in it for me? It is the

work of the church to facilitate and support missional ministry that frees captives, not “ministry” that enslaves them further. If we are to rebuild the foundations, we must rebuild the church. And if we are to rebuild the foundations, we must rebuild the family and surrounding community as the rebuilt church. Only then will we be able to free captives behind iron bars. To get there, we must pray that God will free the church from its own captivity so that it will be a missional community built upon the truth of God’s liberating gospel. We don’t need to keep on destroying the foundations. We can make a difference as we follow God. Will you join me?

LEFT HAND PAGE

Gutter | Binding Edge