

FIRST MISSION TRIP

I headed to Florida in early 1981 to attend my first Christian ministry training at a place called Christian Retreat. It was a Christian Conference Center located in a rural area about 14 miles from Bradenton, Florida. It was started in the late 1960's by Gerald Derstine, who was a Mennonite from eastern Pennsylvania who went to Northern Minnesota in the 1950's as a missionary among the Indians. While there they began to pray for revival. They got more than they could have expected in late December 1954 into early January 1955. The Holy Spirit came upon their gathering of believers just like on the day of Pentecost. This was something that was unknown to the conservative Mennonites. For over a week the Holy Spirit worked among them in a very dramatic way. Many fell to the floor under the power and presence of God, some had heavenly visions or trances while many spoke forth prophetic words from God. One was Amos, an 18 year old Amish boy who went out in the Spirit. As he lay stiffly on the floor, he spoke out a powerful prophecy to Derstine.

Gerald, you are going to be separated from the Mennonite church, but do not fear, for I shall give you a greater ministry. I am going to take you to the outer edges of The Mennonite communities. You shall minister to and teach many of your people the things of my Spirit. Gerald, the Mennonites will not understand now, but they shall see later. I am going to send you into the cities - from city to city you shall go, And you shall minister to multitudes and thousands of my people teaching them about the things of my Spirit.

After Amos finally became fully alert again, Gerald queried him about the experience, but Amos did not even know he had spoken the prophecy. Just like in the Book of Acts, Derstine could not help but share what God had done, but it was not well received among his denomination and he had to leave the Mennonites. He then began to share his experiences and teachings on the present reality of the kingdom of God and life in the Holy Spirit. By the late 1960's he planted the Tabernacle church in Sarasota, Florida and then started Christian Retreat, which became one of the most dynamic and influential charismatic meeting places in the country. It had meetings every night of the week except Mondays for over 25 years. An Institute of Ministry course of 250 hours over a period of 10 weeks was held during the winter months. National speakers from various ministries and denominations had input in that practical training. In 1972 the Mennonites denomination finally recognized the work of the Holy Spirit and Derstine was accepted by them.

In 1980 my father offered to pay my way to enter Theological Seminary in our Dutch Reformed denomination, but by then I already knew that it was not the path for me. My eyes were opened in 1978 to the Holy Spirit through a gathering of Catholics at Villa Maria college in Erie, Pa. and attendance at a 3 day Jesus '78 festival on a farm in Mercer, Pa. I then attended a several week Life in the Spirit Seminar at St James Catholic School in Jamestown NY. I had also developed a tremendous desire to evangelize.

I was led to go to Christian Retreat in Florida after I read the book, **Following the Fire**, which was the incredible story of Gerald Derstine. Before I went there, I went to visit some special friends at their farmhouse in upstate western NY. Wilbur and Jo were a Spirit filled couple that often had young people at their house for Bible studies. One Sunday night they invited me over to their house after church. Also there were Melvin, an elder at my church and his son Paul and a special couple, the Lowns, from about 20 miles away who were very exuberant charismatic Methodists. As we sat around the table and enjoyed some snacks and coffee, Bud and his wife shared stories of their experiences with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. After about an hour one could sense the heavy presence of God was there. (This

happens when Jesus is magnified). It was then that Wilbur suggested that Bud pray for me, because I was soon to leave for Florida. When Bud came over to pray for me, I stood in front of the TV and took off my glasses and placed them on it as I sensed something was about to happen. Bud began to have words of knowledge about me and said that I had some fears that God was going to remove. The next thing I remember is waking up on the floor with this awesome peace and laughter coming from my inner most being. I felt as if I was floating on a cloud and I just wanted to rest in God's presence. As I gazed over the room I saw Paul on the couch also rolling with laughter. It reminds me of the scripture written in 1 Peter 1:8, **'joy unspeakable and full of glory'**.

The next day at Sunday School class, the teacher did not teach his lesson, but asked me if I had anything to share, probably because he knew I was going to leave for Florida in a few days. I was able to describe my experience the night before at the Van Earden house. The pastor's wife then asked me: "Are you sure that wasn't of the devil?". That caught me a bit off guard, but God gave me the illustration of when the soldiers fell down in Jesus' presence at the Garden of Gethsemane - John 18:6. A similar thing happened when the guards at Jesus' tomb fell as if dead at his resurrection.

So I headed to Florida in January 1981, knowing that God was with me. (God often gives us dramatic encounters and encouragement at key transition times in our life) He had also provided me a couple of weeks work in Florida before my classes began. I got a job helping with the construction of a building for a retirement community about 1/2 hour north of Bradenton, FL. The man I worked for was Sam Groters, who was from my rural home area of Clymer NY and at the end of the job he asked me what I was doing after that. When he found out I was going for Bible ministry training, he gave me an extra \$300. That was providential, as I had planned on commuting to the school from my parents' home in Bradenton, but the principal thought it would be much better for me to live on campus. That extra \$300 enabled me to do that and I am so glad I stayed at the Retreat Center. It was an incredible 10 weeks, as I was pretty much cut off from all TV and news etc. and was able to be saturated in God's Word and presence for that concentrated period of time. We were required to read through the whole Bible during that time. (by reading 2 hours each morning I was able to cover all the Old Testament and the first 6 books of the New Testament up into 1 Corinthians.) We had other books to read and give reports on:

- The Kingdom of God - Gerald Derstine
- The Normal Christian Life - Watchman Nee
- How to Be Led of the Spirit - Kenneth Hagin
- No Other Foundation - Devern Fromke

After the 10 weeks were over, we had an option to go on a short mission trip to Jamaica, which I gladly signed up for. A week before we left I was certain that I had the money for the trip, but when I looked at my checkbook, I discovered that I didn't! What I did next was not done in anger, but with great boldness. I threw my Bible on the floor, stood on it and told God that he had promised to meet my needs and I was standing on His Word!

The next day I received a check in the mail from my brother in NY! I had done some work for him the previous autumn on his dairy farm and he discovered that he had not paid me. That money was not quite enough for my trip, but then I discovered that I had made a mistake in my checkbook and found that I had just enough for the mission. PTL!

A few days before leaving for Jamaica, I made a boastful remark to Ruth, one of my fellow classmates who was also going on the trip. I told her that I knew how to lead someone to the Lord. In a few days we were on our trip to Miami and then caught our flight

to Jamaica. After taking in a lot of good things from God during our ministry course, we were now excited to share his love and truth with people in a foreign land. There is a special joy when one obeys a command that is special to God's heart. I was also relieved to know there were no poisonous snakes on the island of Jamaica!

It was early in the evening when we landed in Jamaica, but then we had to make a 2-3 hour journey up in the mountains to a camp near the town of Mandeville. Our van was packed full and I had to stand in the back and hold up some luggage for the entire journey so that it did not fall down. By the time we reached the camp after 11 PM, we were all tired and ready to get to bed. As we went into the one bunkhouse we noticed that some mattresses had open parts where the insides were coming out. Matt, one of our group was aghast and said he would not sleep on them because they might have bugs. That made me averse to the idea too, so Matt and I slept in the van that night! Thankfully, the next evening we had clean mattresses. The showers during our stay had no hot water and the temps in the mountains were only in the low 60's at times. Many times since then, I think of that experience when I have a cold shower.

We had four different teams that were scheduled to visit four different churches one evening. However, after supper our mission leader said that a couple of us would have to stay back because a severe thunderstorm required one church to cancel its service. Ruth and I volunteered to stay back, and then we were told that we should help in the kitchen with the cleanup. Of course it was a bit disappointing to not get a chance to minister at a church, but one thing we had learned in our course was the importance of being servants.

After the teams left, Ruth and I went to the kitchen and helped wash and dry the dishes. There were also three Jamaicans there, one girl and two tall guys. One of the guys started to sing this song.

**I found a new life, I found a new life. If anybody asks you,
what's a matter with you my friend. Just tell 'em I'm
saved, sanctified, Holy Ghost filled, water baptized,
Jesus on my mind. I found a new life.**

Just then I heard the Jamaican girl call out: 'Philip, what are you are singing that song for, you aren't even a Christian!'. Then Ruth looked over at me with a smirk and said to me: 'John, here's your chance.' (to lead someone to Christ). I then turned to Philip and Junior and asked them to go with me to the next building and then led them to receive Christ into their lives. When the teams returned from their trip to the various churches. I asked them, 'Did anybody come to Christ at the churches tonight?' All of them responded with a 'no'. I then proclaimed to them with joy; 'We had two here!'

I get a little misty eyed just recalling this incident. It's not just the fact that these were the first persons I led to Christ overseas, but it was also the way God made it happen. It was because I had chosen to be a servant and let the others go to the churches instead of myself. God had shown his generous favor to me as I humbled myself to obey his leading. One phrase we had learned at Christian Retreat, was how God uses F.A.T. people, those who are Faithful, Available and Teachable.

I am reminded how Jesus did his ministry. As he went about his daily life, he had seemingly spontaneous encounters with people who needed hope, help and healing, but God was at work setting up those divine encounters. He is still doing this today among those who are led of the Holy Spirit and willing to be a F.A.T. person. That includes you!