



PRIMAL FIRE

*Reigniting the Church
with the Five Gifts
of Jesus*

NEIL COLE

*WITH DEZI BAKER, ED WAKEN,
PHIL HELFER & PAUL KAAK*

Every Christian is faced with the joyful task of the Great Commission, to go into the world and make disciples of all the nations. Thankfully, God has not sent us about this task unprepared. In *Primal Fire*, Neil Cole reveals and explains the spiritual gifts given by God and how He uses those gifts through us to accomplish His mission. Any reader will be challenged by its contents.

ED STETZER

President, LifeWay Research, and author of *Subversive Kingdom*

There is always room for a big book about big subjects. How to build a discipleship culture is one of the hottest firestorms in the church today, and this book is the biggest book yet on the very big subject of the APEST team: Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Shepherds, and Teachers.

LEONARD SWEET

Author of *The Well-Played Life*, professor at Drew University and George Fox University, and chief contributor to sermons.com

Neil Cole is neither traditional nor tame, and he is uniquely positioned to write about the five gifts Jesus gave to the church. He doesn't just talk about the principles in this thought-provoking book; he lives them out as a highly effective apostle within a gifted team that has trained tens of thousands of church planters around the world. Neil forces us to think outside our conventional boxes by shedding fresh light on Scriptures we thought we knew well. I highly recommend *Primal Fire* for anyone who longs to see a multiplying and maturing move of God.

FELICITY DALE

Author of *Small Is Big!* and *An Army of Ordinary People*

I am already on record as saying that the Ephesians 4 typology of ministry (APEST) is *almost* a silver bullet for the church in our day. What I *really* believe is that it actually *is* a silver bullet, because it introduces the church to its own authentic ministry and connects us with all the energies associated with the ministry of Christ himself. *Primal Fire* is a fantastic new addition to the topic at a critical juncture in the church's trajectory.

ALAN HIRSCH

Award-winning author of *The Forgotten Ways*, *The Permanent Revolution*, and *Untamed*; and founder of Forge Mission Training Network and Future Travelers

I loved this fresh, brilliant, challenging, and thought-provoking book! I will read it slowly at least three times.

BOB ROBERTS

Senior pastor, NorthWood Church, and author of *Bold as Love*

This book should come with its own fire alarm. It might be too hot for timid or cautious leaders. Neil Cole reignites a flame previously tended by the likes of Wagner, Hirsch, and Breen, and fans it into a roaring blaze, releasing time-honored biblical principles for leaders who want to embrace a genuinely missional paradigm for their churches.

MICHAEL FROST

Vice principal of Morling College, Sydney; and author of *The Road to Missional*



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Published in association with the literary agency of Mark Sweeney and Associates, 28540 Altessa Way, Suite 201, Bonita Springs, FL 34135.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cole, Neil, date.

Primal fire : reigniting the church with the five gifts of Jesus / Neil Cole.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4143-8550-1 (sc)

1. Gifts, Spiritual. I. Title.

BT767.3.C63 2014

234'.13—dc23

2013038905

Printed in the United States of America

20	19	18	17	16	15	14
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

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PREFACE

Drawing Water from Ancient and New Wells

When the well is dry, we know the worth of water.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

*Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst;
but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water
springing up to eternal life.*

JESUS

NEAR MY HOME in Long Beach is a place called Signal Hill, a desirable location for nice homes, with great views of Los Angeles, Long Beach, the Pacific Ocean, and (on a clear day) Catalina Island. On the hillside are two large, beautiful houses that no one has ever lived in. From the time they were built, they have been empty, and today they are boarded up and available at a fraction of the market value for the neighborhood. Nevertheless, no one will buy them. Why? They don't have access to the city water supply. As beautiful and promising as they appear, they lack the most basic utility.

What a tragic picture. How sad to offer so much hope and yet be unable to sustain life.

Most people in North America rarely think about where their water comes from. We see the illustration of snowcapped mountains on the plastic bottle and never stop to think, *Hey, I didn't know there were snowcapped mountains in Valencia, California!* But it's important where we draw our water. A clean and plentiful water source is

enough incentive to build an entire city. A bad water source can be a graveyard.

This book is about five important gifts that Jesus gives to the church so that His body can be built to glorify Him throughout the world. The functions of *apostle*, *prophet*, *evangelist*, *shepherd*, and *teacher* are of vital importance today—but they are often misunderstood because of some less-than-sound teaching that has prevailed. As we seek to restore a proper understanding of these five gifts found in Ephesians 4:11, we feel it is important for you to know where we have gotten our insights. Below are four “water sources” we have tapped for the ideas in this book.

1. *Special revelation*—the Scriptures. First and foremost, all authority for truth comes from what is found plainly in God’s inspired Word. Of course, when it comes to such a study of the Scriptures, we must explain our presuppositions and how we defer authority to various interpretations of key passages.

We started by studying the biblical passages that speak specifically to the roles of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher. Some of the gifts (apostle and prophet, in particular) have much more to do with biblical revelation than others (such as pastor).

We also studied the semantic range and contextual uses of the words describing these roles in the New Testament, as well as extrabiblical uses in and around the first century. Our approach recognizes that the meaning of a word may determine the meaning of a passage and that *context* often affects the meanings of words.

Finally, we considered examples of people in the New Testament (and occasionally the Old Testament) who were called to fulfill the roles mentioned in Ephesians 4:11. We assume that these “living examples” reveal some attributes that characterize each role, especially when they match with the meanings of the words used to label the roles. This, of

course, involves subjective judgment, but we believe these observations are helpful. Sometimes, what people do—or don't do—can be helpful in understanding their gifts.

2. *Progressive revelation*—the momentum of historical learning. Don't be dismayed by the use of the word *revelation* to describe something other than Scripture. “Progressive revelation” simply means the ongoing and increasing understanding of truth that comes with a mounting history of learning. Studying the historical teaching on this subject (of which there is some but not a lot) is significant. We stand on the shoulders of wise and able scholars, in a manner of speaking, building our insights on the work of previous generations.

We also can learn much from the historical examples of men and women who have actually fulfilled these roles.

3. *General revelation*—lessons from life and nature. Studying examples of these roles in contemporary life is important to contextualize our understanding and test the veracity of our insights. Jesus is the very image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15) and the greatest example of each of the five roles. As humans, we too are made in His image, and thus we can assume that some of the qualities of these important roles can be found even in the world of human culture.

There are many lessons to be learned from people who, amid the realities of life, have stepped into the roles of apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, and teacher. Their fruitfulness and faithfulness, exhibited over time, reveal much about these gifts. This is especially helpful when we find those rare examples of fully functioning teams that comprise all five gifts working together.

4. *Personal revelation*—firsthand experience. Listening to God in the context of living in His Word and by His Spirit, with wise

counsel and accountability, has enriched our understanding, as well.

As we have walked together with God and with one another for two decades, discovering our identity and our calling, we have learned much about our roles and these gifts. There is always the danger that we are projecting our own biases and personalities onto our gifts, but there is also no substitute for personal experience in the context of all we've learned from other sources.

We have the Gift Giver within us. He is both the author of the Book and the best teacher in the world. It would not be right to ignore the lessons He has taught us along the way, but we recognize that our experience is supplemental to the truth we have gleaned from other, more authoritative sources.

We fully understand that some of the wells we have drawn from are more fallible and subjective than others. Whenever possible, we have compared what we were learning with other sources, which helped to substantiate some of our insights and prompted us to communicate others with a far more tentative voice. We have done our best to examine all our conclusions by the light of Scripture, but this is not an exact science; it is a faith journey, which makes it far more exciting. We are still in the process of discovery, and we learn more every day.

Though what we will share in this book is a compilation of what we have learned over decades in the pursuit of God's calling in our lives, we accept that we still have much yet to learn. We look forward to carrying future generations on our shoulders so that they can reach higher than we have.

WHO WROTE THIS BOOK?

God has truly blessed me with the opportunity to work alongside Dezi Baker, Ed Waken, Phil Helfer, and Paul Kaak as we began what

is now called the organic church movement. At first, we were not aware of how our individual gifts would complement one another; we were all “just pastors” who loved Jesus and wanted to see more churches planted. But as we worked together, we discovered a new synergy. It became a holy calling for us to collaborate, even if we could not articulate why. There was a greater reason to join forces than simply the objectives of our movement (as holy as those were). There were no job descriptions to guide us, nor was it something our own ministries could rightly understand. All we knew was that God was doing something special in our midst and we wanted more of it.

One day, while on a retreat, we recognized that we were fulfilling the different roles found in Ephesians 4:11. Paul was born to be a teacher, Phil is clearly a shepherd, Ed is an evangelist right down to the core, Dezi is a prophetic leader, and I have the vision and drive of an apostle.

As we discerned these differences, it explained our synergy and also informed our future working relationships more specifically. We began to defer to one another’s strengths and experimented with our variety of gifts in different environments. Dezi and I collaborated to open up new territory and engage the enemy in spiritual warfare. When we needed an ambassador for our movement in larger Kingdom meetings, Ed the evangelist always made a good impression. To bond an overseas team together, our shepherd, Phil, was the key. And Paul and I developed the Greenhouse curriculum that gave the movement wings as it not only trained people in organic church planting but also trained the trainers. Our movement ignited and spread.

For a long time, most of us have flown under the radar, simply representing our gifts within our movement and in the spheres of influence God has given us. Now, however, I can’t help but think of this book as a coming out for our team. As we mature in our gifts and seek to equip others for God’s work, we are ready to lay our cards on the table. There are many other books about the five gifts of Ephesians 4:11, but none like this one. Though I (Neil) am the

author of the book and wrote every page, my teammates have contributed their considerable gifts to the writing. As such, this book is not written from only one perspective; all five gifts are well represented. Not only does each man's influence contribute to a better understanding of his own gift, but together they bring the strength of their giftedness to bear on the rest of the book as well.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

If we have done our work well, you will find within these pages many challenges to the standard theological view of the Ephesians 4:11 gifts that has been passed down through the ages. We will examine common assumptions about the authority of leaders in the church, and about women in ministry and in leadership. And we'll ask some basic questions, such as: What is a deacon? What are spiritual gifts? What is the baptism of the Holy Spirit? What is the evidence of being baptized in the Spirit? Even as basic an idea as who we are in Christ will be addressed.

You may not agree with everything—or anything—we say. But I hope you'll take the time to consider our point of view and be willing to read with an open mind and an open Bible. We have done our best to support our arguments with a responsible use of Scripture, and we have cited our supplemental sources to make it easy for you to follow up with other reading. We have also included a fair amount of corollary discussion in the endnotes, so as not to disrupt the flow of the book but to provide deeper thinking on certain ideas.

Most books on spiritual gifts are geared toward fitting people into the ministry of a local church program. You will find no such prescription here. In fact, this book is not simply about roles in the church. It is a book about the fullness of Christ in all His people. We do ourselves a great disservice in the church when we reduce people to filling slots in a program. The message of Ephesians 4:1-16 is far more important than simply getting everyone working according to their strengths for the betterment of the church. It is about Christ—who He is and how

He is present in His body (and therefore in the world). If you're tired of books about spiritual gifts that make it "all about you," this book will be refreshing. It was *never* about you; it has always been about Christ.

Our purpose here is to start a conversation, not bring the last word. As a team, we have been on this journey together for about twenty years now, and we have all grown and changed a lot over the years. We would consider it a failure if we did not continue to change as the years go by. The ideas we put forth here are not carved in marble; they were typed on a word processor. It is always a great challenge to put something in writing, because you may have to live with it for the rest of your life. It has taken us many years to get to the point where we feel we can publish this book, but we readily acknowledge that the conversation and learning must continue.

Welcome to the conversation. Welcome to the journey.

Neil Cole

LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA

AUGUST 2013

INTRODUCTION

A Fire That Does Not Consume

I just set myself on fire, and people come from miles around to watch me burn.

JOHN WESLEY

Set me alight. . . . We'll punch a hole right through the night!

BONO

I REMEMBER well the bus ride home from San Pedro High School to our own Palisades High School in 1977. We had just won the California Interscholastic Federation Los Angeles City Section water polo championship for the second year in a row in convincing fashion. We were full of excitement and ready to celebrate our victory.

From twenty or so miles away, we saw smoke rising on the hills in the direction of our hometown, but we didn't think much of it . . . until we got closer. I will never forget pulling into the school parking lot and seeing fire descending from the ridge above our neighborhood. The celebration ceased as we watched in silent awe, eager to get to our own homes and families. In the time it had taken us to drive twenty miles, the spark from a little match had become a raging wildfire.

I grew up in the canyons of Southern California, where each fall the winds shift from the cool, moist Pacific Ocean to blow in from the hot, scorched deserts to the east. These Santa Ana winds come after the warm, dry summer months have killed all the underbrush in

the canyons, leaving plenty of dead, dry grass. Any fire up in the hills will soon be raging out of control—and often several fires at once.

What makes these wildfires so challenging is the “perfect storm” of conditions. The dry chaparral makes excellent kindling, and the steep hillsides of the many canyons form wind channels that accelerate the already fierce gusts exploding off the desert. The narrow stretches of the canyons also bring acres of tinder that much closer to the ravenous reach of the flames, which skip from ridge to ridge as if dancing in the glowing inferno. The fire spreads rapidly, whipped by the strong winds, with no regard for whatever lies in its path. The sight is wondrous and devastating at the same time.

It’s strange that we can know *why* these fires happen, where the vulnerabilities lie, and even when they will start, and yet we’re powerless to stop them. There is a force of nature that simply laughs at our vain attempts to control its fickle fury.

As a young man, my father fought to save his home from the Malibu fire of 1956. Though Dad was not a small man—standing 6’3” with a trim, athletic build from years of swimming and surfing—he nevertheless felt small and weak as the flames roared above his head on their way toward his house. The intense heat and deafening roar left a scar on his soul he would not soon forget. It was as if the flames were taunting his seemingly futile efforts to stop them. During the Mandeville Canyon fire, in 1978, I remember standing side by side with my dad, hosing down the roof of our house instead of celebrating my water polo championship. Our home barely escaped the destruction.

After the fire was out, I went for a hike through the hills above our neighborhood and felt like I was in another world. For miles in every direction, all I could see was scorched, black earth, with the charcoal skeletons of dead trees reaching up in petrified agony. Not a single green leaf, not a blade of grass, not even the smallest insect could be found. And not a solitary bird ventured over this wasteland. It was like being on the moon.

In 2008, after battling canyon fires for more than fifty years, my father lost his home, his lifetime of artwork, and most of his pets in

the Sylmar fire. He was never quite the same after that. The flames that had taunted him as a young man and haunted him throughout his adult life had returned to claim their final victory. My dad passed away in 2011 at the age of eighty-one.

THE PRIMAL FIRE

Not all fires are destructive, of course. Fire is also a *gift* to humanity—for warmth, illumination, nourishment, energy, purification, and the forging of tools that make human culture possible. In the Bible, fire often symbolizes the holy presence of God. It is this kind of fire—the primal fire of God—that we will consider throughout this book.

For some, the word *primal* may conjure up images of unshaven men in loincloths gathered around a bonfire, beating drums. But *primal* simply means “original” or “first in importance.” When applied to the fire of God, it speaks of a fire older than time itself, yet always fresh; an eternal flame that is both ancient and immediate. The primal fire of God flares up throughout the Bible, often bringing with it dramatic, world-altering changes.

God appears to Abraham as a smoking firepot and a flaming torch, passing between the halves of the animals that Abraham has cut up for sacrifice (Genesis 15:17, NLT). It is the same fire that later appears to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:2), descends on Mount Sinai after the Exodus (Exodus 19:18), and settles on the heads of the believers at Pentecost (Acts 2:3). Jesus will appear with His angels in a flaming primal fire at the end (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8). And on the eventual Judgment Day, it is the primal fire that will burn away all the chaff, leaving only what is pure and valuable enough to be in God’s presence (1 Corinthians 3:13).

Although the Bible describes God as “a consuming fire” in Exodus, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Hebrews, there are several remarkable occasions when the fire burns but does not destroy what it rests upon. We find the bush that Moses encountered in the desert (Exodus 3:1-3); the flames that tested Shadrach, Meshach, and

Abednego in the Babylonian furnace (Daniel 3:23-27); the hot coal applied to the unclean lips of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5-7); and the tongues of fire and rushing wind that descended on the disciples in the upper room at Pentecost (Acts 2:2-3). In all these cases, the fire of God brought healing rather than destruction, freedom instead of bondage, and illumination, purification, and divine revelation that were desperately needed.

Of course, if we step outside the will of God, all bets are off. As Proverbs 6:27-28 says about sexual immorality, “Can a man scoop a flame into his lap and not have his clothes catch on fire? Can he walk on hot coals and not blister his feet?” (NLT). Let us not forget that the same flames that had no effect on Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego consumed the men who had tossed them into the furnace. The fire that fell from heaven destroyed the soldiers sent by King Ahaziah but left Elijah unharmed (2 Kings 1:10-12). And I doubt that anyone wants an up close encounter with the flaming sword the angel wields to protect the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24).

So the fire of God is at once terrifying and beautiful, all-consuming and yet restorative, deserving of our love and our reverent fear. What seems to make the difference—and this will be important when we get to the topic of the lost gifts of Jesus—is that we remain *within* God’s purpose as He applies the fire to vessels that are both set apart and willing to be used.

To be clear, it’s not that the receptacles God chooses must somehow make themselves *worthy*. It wasn’t the bush that made the Moses encounter so special. When you think about it, any old shrub would have sufficed. And Moses himself was a hotheaded murderer who had spent the previous forty years tending sheep on the back side of a Midianite desert. No, it’s always the *fire* that is special, and we must not lose sight of that.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were three young Hebrew lads living in exile. The prophet Isaiah confessed his own unworthiness and was mortified by his “unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5). The disciples waiting in the upper room were the same guys who, just weeks before, had

been arguing about who among them was the greatest (Luke 22:24), and then hid in fear from the authorities (John 20:19). But what these otherwise flawed and ordinary people all had in common was that they were available and willing to be used by God.

Such is the kindling that can catch fire if the spark is ignited. When the wind of the Holy Spirit blows, the flame will spread. But first we must recognize and acknowledge that the primal fire of God is still with us today—the fire that Moses encountered and that came upon the first disciples is available to us all. The flame that was in the burning bush was the presence of Christ, just as the flame that fell on the disciples at Pentecost was the presence of Christ’s Spirit. The same person whom Nebuchadnezzar saw standing amid the flames with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is with us now and wants to energize us with the flames of His primal fire. Let’s allow Him to cleanse our unclean lips and replace our own words with a holy message: “Here am I. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8).

A COMING FIRESTORM

When the primal fire of God descended on the believers assembled on the Day of Pentecost, it ignited a wildfire of repentance and baptism, resulting in three thousand souls being added to God’s Kingdom the very first day. And that was just the beginning. As the new believers continued to gather together in unity, “with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people . . . the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:41, 46-47).

It is clear from Scripture that Jesus intended for the Kingdom to spread swiftly. He spoke of the Kingdom of God starting small like a mustard seed and then growing to become the largest of trees (Matthew 13:31-32). He spoke of the Kingdom of God being like a pinch of leaven dropped into some dough that rapidly transformed the entire lump (13:33). He spoke of a seed that bore fruit, multiplying thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and one hundredfold (13:23). The book of

Acts clearly lays out for us the story of a viral movement in the first century that became unstoppable. Persecution, famine, and poverty couldn't stop it. In fact, adversity only fanned the flames into a greater spreading of the gospel.

I don't know about you, but I want to be part of an unstoppable Jesus movement *in our day*—a wildfire of the Spirit that spreads rapidly and uncontrollably and leaves behind people who are transformed into healthy, mature, life-giving followers of King Jesus. My hope is that this book will take us all one step closer to the conditions necessary to see this happen. From my earliest days as a Christ follower, I haven't been able to shake this desire, even during the years when I experienced a Christianity that never seemed to spread at all.

Only recently have I begun to see the sort of development I have always dreamed about—but this is just the beginning. Like the wildfires my father fought throughout his life, such a movement is hard to stop when the conditions line up right. These movements always begin with a small spark, barely noticeable, but when the kindling is set and the wind fans the flame, the fire builds to the point where it can no longer be contained. At that point, retreat or surrender are the only alternatives.

I believe we are about to witness the eruption of a spiritual wildfire like nothing seen since the first century. I see conditions coming together to form the “perfect storm” for a viral movement of God in our generation. The Santa Ana winds that spread a firestorm always blow from the barren desert, not from the oceans teeming with life. As soon as the Spirit blows and fans the spark of the gospel in our dried-up lives, we will see this movement launch and spread.

These days, we are baking under the summerlike heat of a season of global challenges. A worldwide economic crisis, political futility that is anything but benign, cultural decline, failed systems, moral bankruptcy, wars and rumors of wars, and even catastrophic natural disasters are preparing us for something. The rise in technological advances, much like the steep hills of the canyons where I grew up, are bringing lives closer together so that the flames can spread and the Spirit's force can be accelerated.

Our own souls are the dry kindling for this coming wildfire. As we slowly die to the things we once thought would bring us life but now see are neither life-producing nor worthy of our faith, our hearts are being prepared to burn for something better. The fierce wind of the Holy Spirit coming out of the deadness of the wilderness will fan the flames of the gospel and spread it from one willing soul to another until an unstoppable movement ignites. I have waited my whole life for this. I believe it is inevitable and coming soon, and I'm willing to give my life for it. Are you?

FIVE SMOLDERING EMBERS

The catalyst for the coming outbreak of spiritual fire can be found in five “smoldering embers” that Christ Himself embedded in the DNA of the church from the very beginning.

He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

EPHESIANS 4:11-13

It is our supposition that the gifts of *apostle*, *prophet*, *evangelist*, *shepherd* (*pastor*), and *teacher* (which, for simplicity, we will sometimes refer to as the APEST gifts) were given to the church to bring about the full expression of Christ's beauty and glory in the world.

Apostles are gifted with “contagious empowerment” and are tasked with the overall vigor and extension of the church as a whole, primarily through direct mission, apostolic designs of ministry, and church planting.¹ To borrow J. R. Woodward's terminology, these are the “dream awakeners” in our midst.²

Prophets are attuned to the voice of God and how we respond to Him. They are gifted with “contagious insight” and are called to maintain the body’s faithfulness to God. As guardians of our covenant relationship with God, they are the “heart revealers” among us.

Evangelists bring “contagious compassion” to their role as the primary recruiters to the cause of Christ, enlisting people into the movement by transmitting the gospel. They are the body’s “storytellers.”

Shepherds nurture the spiritual health and development of a loving community as they exercise their gift of “contagious unity.” They are the “soul healers” in the church.

Teachers convey wisdom and illuminate understanding of the revelation given to the church. They are the “light givers” within the body of Christ.

Individually, these gifts reflect parts of a whole that, when seen together, manifest the full image of God and the full measure of Jesus Christ.

It is only when *all* these gifts are released to function naturally in the body and they mature to the point of *equipping others* that the church will fully reflect Jesus—in all His beauty—to the world. In order for this to happen, we must first discern what these gifts are, understand that they are still active today, and rediscover how they are intended to work together to accomplish God’s purpose here on earth. In isolation from one another, the embers will remain dormant; but drawn together in unity of purpose, they await only the wind of the Holy Spirit to fan them into full flame.

We have seen it happen. We can testify to the reality of the blessings and the benefits that come when those who possess these gifts submit to one another under Christ’s headship. A global movement has ignited and spread when just a few leaders took this to heart and surrendered their own egos and agendas for the sake of the greater cause. This book is about what could happen if the entire body of Christ were to catch the fire, as God intends.

SECTION ONE

**REDISCOVERING
THE LOST GIFTS
OF JESUS**



ONE

DISCOVERING THE PRIMAL FIRE WITHIN

We were given appetites, not to consume the world and forget it, but to taste its goodness and hunger to make it great. That is the unconsolable heartburn, the lifelong disquietude of having been made in the image of God.

ROBERT FARRAR CAPON

Isn't it amazing that we are all made in God's image, and yet there is so much diversity among his people?

DESMOND TUTU

YOU DON'T HAVE to be a movie critic or a literary scholar to know that the realm of storytelling is fueled by the mythic imagining of a world of heroes (both ordinary and super-) who somehow save the planet from evil villains. Even a cursory scan of modern blockbuster films reveals our abiding fascination with this singular theme: *Superman, Spider-Man, Batman, X-Men, The Avengers, The Fantastic Four, The Incredibles, Iron Man, Hancock*. The list is extensive and ever growing. This almost-universal dream reflects our innate desire to outgrow our ordinary lives, to break free and learn how to fly. Deep within our hearts is a yearning to be special—to make a difference in the world because we have a unique ability that sets us apart for a greater good.

This idea of a larger-than-life version of ourselves—something truly heroic—is a fascinating one. It is powerful and fundamental to who we are. In every age and every culture, some form of the hero

myth can be found. From Gilgamesh to the Green Lantern, from Beowulf to Batman, from Hercules to the Hulk to Hercules again, heroes are part of the human psyche. The desire to be special and significant is cut deep in our souls, a primal fire waiting only to be set free.

But what if these dreams are actually *from God*? What if part of the very fabric of our humanity is to at some point begin to ask, *Is this all there is? Is there more to me than what I see in the mirror? Could I be more than I am now? What am I destined to become?*

I believe these rumblings of the soul are God-designed—that part of what it means to be made in the image of God is a desire to be significant and heroic representatives of God in the world. These stories are so compelling to us because, deep in our hearts, we know we lost something of our intended place and power when we allowed sin to prevail on our planet. And ever since we were cast out of the Garden, we have longed to reclaim the original significance we were created and destined to have.

FIVE GLIMPSES OF PARADISE

My wife, Dana, and I have always been fascinated by the idea of what life was like prior to the Fall, when human beings were uncorrupted by sin, perfect in design and yet able to learn and grow. Imagine the uncluttered human mind functioning with a pure soul in a perfect body. Imagine a pure DNA untainted by our fallenness and by generations of poor living in a corrupted world. What would it be like to have access to 100 percent of our brains, in bodies designed to live forever? This side of eternity, we'll never fully know what we missed out on.

There is not a lot of biblical material to work with when trying to piece together what humanity was like prior to the Fall. At the beginning of Genesis, the account of the Fall comes quickly, and the beauty of our original intention is lost after little more than a couple of short chapters. But perhaps even that tiny snapshot grants us some insight

into who we were meant to be and why we carry within ourselves this desire for more.

From the Creation account, I want to make five brief observations about our humanity and the seeds of God's image and purpose that were planted in Adam, safeguarded in the person of Jesus Christ, and gifted back to us in the church. These seeds—or *assignments*—given to Adam by God reveal something about how we are created in the image of God and are charged with productive, spiritual tasks that naturally suit us. In these five characteristics, we see how we were born to reflect God's very nature to the world.

1. *Master architects of a beautiful fruit-bearing garden.* The first assignment given Adam was the responsibility to “cultivate and keep” the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15). He was to care for the created world and master it in a special and holy balance of usefulness and stewardship. Likewise, we have a responsibility to all the earth to maintain the perfect balance God designed so that our planet continues to thrive and provide a place for us to live and grow. We long to see the fruit of our labors and to produce something beautiful for all of humankind. We were created to create. In the image of God, we are made to be creative builders who master our environment. In a very real sense, our role in the created order is as royalty (1 Peter 2:9).

God's intention for us is so expansive that when we ponder the responsibility He has given us, we are left breathless. As God's creative builders, we are to cultivate the earth to make it fruitful, preserve peace, maintain the ecological balance, and discover new technologies. As we understand and swim in the genius of the design that God placed in us, we can apply it to our architecture, clothing, art, transportation, agriculture, and every other realm of human endeavor, until we begin to see possibilities that can flow only out of the mind of God. We are to be architects of cities, farms,

art, technology, and enterprises of all sorts. These designs and discoveries are meant to reproduce and provide stability, beauty, strength, and progress throughout time so that God's story is responded to with deep worship worldwide.

Adam was not to stay in the Garden of Eden; he was told to procreate and fill the earth. It is in this first assignment that we see the beginnings of the *apostolic* gifting as we are *sent out* into the world as architects who are to be fruitful and multiply God's work throughout the earth.

2. *Guardians against evil in the world.* Adam was assigned to rule over God's creation. The Hebrew word translated "to keep," as it is used in Genesis 2:15—"God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it"—can also mean "to guard," as it is used in Genesis 3:24, when the angel is placed at the entrance to the Garden of Eden with a flaming sword to keep Adam and Eve out. In that context, the word means "to meet a threat with force."

As custodians of God's creation, Adam was to keep and protect God's Kingdom against a hostile enemy. But protect it from what? What could possibly be a threat in a perfect paradise? We don't have to wait long for an answer. Right away, in Genesis 3, a threat emerges that outwits Adam in the first encounter. From that point forward, we have become soldiers in an epic battle between good and evil. Deep within us is a drive to do something heroic for the sake of others. We want to overcome the evil that oppresses and destroys all that is good. Our role in the created order is to stand up to the evil, do battle, and overcome.

Like Adam, we have been created with a purpose to discern our surroundings and protect the world from an encroaching and sly evil. We must be watchful, prepared, and ready to do spiritual battle with evil when it comes. We are to protect what is holy. This is a small picture of the *prophetic* image of God placed in man from the beginning.

3. *Passing on good news from God.* Adam and Eve were given a mission that involved growing a family of devoted children of God. Part of our natural makeup as human beings is to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. This involves more than simply populating the earth. Part of our innate mission as the people of God is to pass on His message to others, so that together we reflect God's image on earth. Because we were created for this purpose, deep within us is a natural desire to be part of something that involves others. We are made to need one another. God Himself said, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). We long to partner with others to accomplish something bigger than ourselves.

God gave Adam good news of freedom, grace, and abundant living: Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth, and freely eat the fruit from the trees in the Garden. There was only one restriction: Don't eat the fruit from one particular tree. Everything else was free.

Adam told all this to Eve, who told the serpent in an innocent but natural fashion. Just as Adam was expected to tell everyone who came after him the good news that God had given him, we all have an innate sense within us that we were designed to tell others the Good News we have received from God. This is the root of the *evangelistic* impulse.

4. *Honest, vulnerable, and unashamed.* When Adam and Eve were in the Garden, they were naked and unashamed. They saw only the beauty in each other rather than anything lacking in themselves. They had no secrets and no vanity. This is an unfamiliar virtue today, except in isolated instances. This strength of character—putting others before ourselves—is part of what was stolen from us by sin. When Adam and Eve had their eyes opened to see the world differently because of the experiential knowledge of good and evil, something interesting happened immediately: they recognized their own nakedness, felt ashamed, and began to

hide in the shadows. Prior to the Fall, Adam saw only Eve's beauty, and Eve saw only Adam's beauty. Their eyes were focused on each other, not themselves.

The very nature of being other-focused—seeing the beauty in others and not considering our own state—is a small glimpse of the *pastoral* quality inherent in us. We are made to be open to beauty and to see the best in others, just as Adam and Eve did in the beginning and our Great Shepherd always does. The other-centered view is essential to the shepherding role of bringing out the individual strengths of others for the good of the whole, and it is also at the heart of the shepherd's willingness to lay down his or her life for the sheep.

5. *Investigators who study, catalog, and enjoy all of creation.*

Adam was given a task to fulfill even before Eve came on the scene. He was to observe and name all the animals in the world. Think of the giant task that must have been. This was more than simply assigning a name. To give something a name means that you are responsible for it and have some authority in providing its care. The reason Adam was given the task is also revealing. He was without a companion and he was to search all of creation before she would be revealed. God directed Adam to see the many differences in the animals of the world, to study them and understand how he stood among them as unique. This intensive study set the stage for Adam to appreciate Eve all the more when he awoke to find her with him.

It is mind-blowing to consider the pure brainpower of the first man, untainted by sin. He could quickly analyze every creature on the planet, identify what made each unique, and classify it with a name. This suggests a deep curiosity and fascination and incredible analytic skills. Adam was responsible not only for determining each creature's name, but also for passing on to succeeding

generations what he had observed about that creature and why it carried its name. This is where we briefly glimpse the *teacher* quality of man in the original creation.

It's not easy, with so few verses, to uncover all the gifts of Ephesians 4:11 in the original creation, especially since there were only two humans on the planet at the time. Evangelists and shepherds find fulfillment in the company of other people, so we're left to look for small hints and quick glances of these gifts in Adam. But they are there nonetheless.

No other creature is made in the image of God. So we can look for the character of God reflected in our own character. For instance, just as God is creative, we are full of designs and are always building new things. Just as God is holy, we are called to be holy and to defend virtue, goodness, and truth. God speaks what is true, and we are created to announce good news. God is united as three distinct persons in one, and we are created to be in close communion with others. God is all-knowing, and we were created with a deep-rooted desire to learn and increase in knowledge. We alone among God's creation are able to reason with abstract thought and consider the future. We can communicate in deep and reflective ways, and ask important questions. Only humanity is able to make tools and design and build things. We reflect our Creator in the ways we protect the downtrodden, hate what is evil and unjust, tell others the Good News, and find beauty in nature and in each other.

I believe these five glimpses of paradise reveal something about how we were created in the image of God and how we're intended to reflect God's beauty and glory. Every person, even apart from a relationship with Christ, is made in the image of God and thus shares these qualities, albeit often in a corrupted form tainted with selfishness.

Part of what it means to be created in the image of God is that we have been entrusted with certain assignments that reflect the character and nature of God and support His purpose in the world. These

seeds of God's image and purpose were planted in Adam, but were lost or corrupted in the Fall. Nevertheless, God safeguarded these seeds in the person of Jesus Christ, who gifted them back to us in the church. But these gifts are not like packages that Christ wrapped up and handed to us; they are qualities of Christ (God) Himself that we "come into" when we become part of Christ's body here on earth.

When Adam and Eve fulfilled these assignments, they reflected God's image. Unfortunately, when Adam failed in his role, the beautiful image of God became veiled by the ugliness of unbridled evil. Our glory was stolen from us. Nevertheless, we still carry that image deep in our hearts and long for what could have been.

But here's the good news that undergirds the gospel: The second Adam, Jesus, overcame the curse, conquered the enemy who stole our glory, restored our original assignments, and restored the true image of God in us. In fact, He is the fullness of God in bodily form. He and the Father are one. As He said to His disciples, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father" (John 14:9, CEV).

In the next chapter, we will demonstrate how Jesus is the fullest representation of all five of the gifts mentioned in Ephesians 4:11. These functions, which we saw in small glimpses in Adam and Eve before the Fall, are the picture of Christ, and therefore the image of God. Thus the roles mentioned in Ephesians are more than simply a division of labor in a church organization. These five roles represent the facets of God's image that our restored humanity is intended to reflect. When these facets work together in harmony, they are what allow us to display God's glory to the nations.

When humanity was first created and placed in the Garden, we were given a mission, along with the ability and authority to accomplish it. We were commanded to multiply and fill the earth with God's glory, and to take care of the Garden, to study it, and also to protect it. We were given a message that we were to pass on to subsequent generations. We were to be united as one just as the Godhead is one. But we failed with every assignment. Relationally, we turned on each other, which led to envy and murder in the very first generation

after Adam and Eve. We were banned from the beauty of the Garden but still entrusted with the responsibility to care for God's creation. We were commanded to fill the earth, but we kept trying to stay in one place. Eventually, God had to mix up our languages to get us to go. And of course we failed to protect the world from evil, and we have been suffering for it ever since. Fortunately, the epic story doesn't end there.

What we learn about humanity from the first chapters of the Bible is that we were created to be something special in the world—to build a world that is holy unto the Lord and to fight the evil that wants to tear down God's Kingdom. Humans were meant to be, in one sense, superheroes in this life.

The result of the Fall is that we carry within us a sense of loss for what should have been. We are discontent with who we are now because we were meant to be so much more. We have latent within us a power that enables us to do something that will leave lasting change for the better in this world, but this power is muted by our selfishness, ignorance, and rebellion. We lost the strength and beauty of our original design when sin was let loose in our world.

The Good News is that when Jesus came, He took the curse of the Fall upon Himself and defeated the enemy who threatens our collective mission. Christ has redeemed us from the destruction of the Fall and ultimately will restore us to the roles we were destined to fulfill. We believe that part of Christ's redemption is a rebirthing of the power within us to make the world a better place. We still must overcome our enemy's plots in this world and restore our humanity to its original reflected glory in Christ.

God has designed all of us to become more than what meets the eye. The core thesis of this book is that God designed humanity in His image—that is, to reflect His beauty and glory in the earth. We *corrupted* it in the Garden, but God *preserved* it in Christ. And as we come into Christ, we get it back—not as a *possession* (as if it were all about *us*) but as a clearing away of the corruption and clutter so that God's image may once again shine unrestrained through us all

together as one in Him. He has planned for all human beings on the planet to reach their full God-given potential, fulfill their personal mission, and become complete in Christ.

The whole point of Ephesians 1–3 is that God has *already* invested Himself in us. We have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. We lack nothing. We need to realize what is within us already (“Christ in you”) . . . and let it leak out naturally in our words and actions.

Jesus came, died, rose, and sent the Holy Spirit to indwell us with His power. The true beauty within us is liberated, enhanced, and empowered by the Good News of redemption and the resulting mystery of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). We don’t have to *gain* more spirituality; we simply need to live out what is already invested in us. If we are “in Christ,” and thus a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17, ESV), everything we need is *already* within us—young or old, male or female, rich or poor.

If we are in Christ, we don’t need to try to *gain* the riches of Christ; we need to realize that Christ’s full treasure is *already* within us. Doing good works, memorizing more Scripture, praying more, and devoting ourselves to spiritual disciplines will not gain us any more spiritual blessings than we already have. All we will ever need or want is already found within us, but not as the result of good works that we can boast about (see Ephesians 2:8-10). In fact, taking the pathway of *performance* in an effort to gain *godliness* will only hinder the release of the true blessing that is already within us. We need to open our eyes to what we already have, rather than setting our sights on what we think we need.

The price has already been paid. Jesus came, served, bled, died, and rose so that we can be released and empowered to become what we are meant to be. The Curse has been taken from us and nailed to the cross. We are no longer under bondage to the Fall, but are now free to follow our heavenly Father “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”

(Ephesians 4:2-4). Jesus went through hell (Ephesians 4:9-10) so that we can have a special role in His plan.

As you read this book, we want you to realize that these promises apply to *you*. These gifts are not just for “leaders,” but for each one of us. “To each one of us grace was given” (Ephesians 4:7). Only as we *all* function according to the grace given to us will the whole body become obedient to its head, Jesus, and reveal Him to a dying world.

As with all hero stories, first we must realize that we have been given a gift. Then we must learn how to use it correctly under the tutelage of a wise master. Finally, the master must step out of the way so that we ourselves can arise to become equippers of the next generation.

This is your story. Start your adventure today! Become the hero that God has destined you to be.

