

## **Greetings!**

In the midst of much confusion and ungodly living in their church, the Apostle Paul addresses the Corinthians with these words, ***"For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel"***.

Have we become as the Corinthians? I would like to ask you one simple question . . .

***Do you have a spiritual father?***

## **Spiritual Fathers**

Greeted by a couple of hound dogs, we pulled into the yard after a drive through the north Florida woods. Stepping out of the truck, Sharon looked my way smiling. "There he is, looking out the door". Sure enough, sitting in his wheel chair, peering around the edge of the door, were two bright eyes and a wide smile. He reminded me of a little boy watching mom come home from the store to see what she had brought him. I wasn't sure which one of us was more excited about our visit.

I didn't know what to expect; I'd not seen him since our wedding day. Sharon and I had stood before him exchanging wedding vows but, somehow I had drifted away from someone who had made a profound impact on my life. Almost all of my spiritual roots can be traced back to his influence in my early years as a Christian.

"Brother Griffin!" Seldom had I heard that phrase since leaving my rural home for the big city, but it sounded mighty good to hear it once again. Wearing denim coveralls cut a little short, slippers and a long sleeve shirt on a hot summer day; he was a joy to see. Hugs, tears and of course a "God bless you!" made us feel right at home, as if time had never slipped us by.

Pictures of the family, mostly of him and his wife filled the room. Slipping into his chair we started catching up, and there was a lot of that to be done. We told him about our children and grandkids, while he related to us the passing of two of his seven children, and of his beloved wife a few weeks prior to our visit. As tears begin to drip from his aged cheeks, he recalled her passing, "Brother Griffin, I should have gone with her." Though her name was Celia, he often referred to her as "doll-baby". With every recalled story, my heart saddened that I'd let our relationship slip away. He was indeed my spiritual father and I wanted to cry out like Esau, "Bless me, even me also, O my father!", but now was not the time.

In his early years he had a rough reputation but, while feeding the hogs one day, he met his rival and lost the match. As he tells it, a car with a loud speaker on the roof and an evangelist inside, came driving slowly down the sandy dirt road. The evangelist was preaching to anyone who could hear, and the loudspeaker carried his sermon down to the hog pen. That day Celia's prayers were answered. Emmett Whaley "got saved".

Sensing a call to preach, he bought a tent and Wakulla County would forever be marked by his ministry. Not able to read, Celia would read the scriptures and he would preach. Night upon night, inside an old army surplus tent, souls gave up their will to his sermons. Together, they ministered in thousands of weddings, funerals and hospital rooms. Even the Chaplain of Tallahassee Memorial Hospital once referred to him as the "Bishop of Wakulla County". Emmett and Celia were quite the team.

On June 5, 1974, he laid his hands upon my head and ordained me to the ministry. Then, taking me under his wing we made hospital visits together, preached funerals and shared the pulpit. I'll forever remember the Mother's Day that he was away preaching at another church, and I was asked to give the sermon at our church. It may have been Mother's Day; however, the real work taking place was between a father and a son. Why he trusted me at age 18, as he did, I'll never understand; but, isn't that like fathers training their sons? Sometimes they just have to let go and allow the son to find his place.

With our visit coming to an end, Sharon and I knelt at his feet and asked for his blessing over us once again. As he finished praying, with head still bowed, he asked, "Brother Griffin will you pray that I'll have peace in my heart?" and once again the tears fell.

Where have all of our spiritual fathers and mothers gone?

Our churches have substituted books and CDs with our "message" in their place and we have filled our lives with Bible classes and support groups. Now, we are left with few spiritual fathers to imprint themselves upon their sons or, mothers to guide their daughters. Is it no wonder that marriages are failing at an unprecedented rate in our churches and relationships between its members are often frivolous?

Fathers must be willing to be fathers, and sons to be sons. Without an understanding of this relationship, rebellion and dishonor far too often becomes our spiritual family's history. I was most fortunate to have had Pastor Whaley's influence in my life; I was not a "spiritual bastard", but a loved and cherished son. I considered it not an insult to be under his tutelage but rather, an honor. I not only listened to him, but often sought out his advice as I began my ministry. Without his fatherly love, I can only imagine what my life would be like today.

My pastor, at age 93, will forever stand tall in my heart. The man who turned his tool shed into a study, and taught himself to read from a King James Bible, will always be my spiritual father. My one regret? That I waited almost thirty years to let him know how I felt.

***And that's just a thought . . .***

## ***My Final Word***

While Sharon and I were visiting back home in north Florida this month, we made it a priority to spend some time with my former pastor, Emmett Whaley. It was a thrill to see my spiritual father once again. He and his wife have stood as beacons to thousands and the lives they touched will never be fully comprehended until we stand in eternity.

I have become painfully aware that our churches today are almost void of spiritual fathers and mothers. We choose our church, and its functions that we wish to attend, like food from a Chinese menu; one from column A and something from column B, with little thought as to what we're investing in the lives around us. We live as islands, isolated from the mainstream, too busy or uninterested to make a difference.

Sister Whaley passed away July 1, 2009 at the age of 91. Her legacy though will live on through unknown generations, as will that of her husband. Too many today threat the ministry as a career choice but, to the Whaley's it was their lifestyle. You can ask almost anyone in Wakulla County where Pastor Whaley lives and they will direct you to Emmett Whaley Road, with each turn to his house. With the exception of "the newcomers" everyone knows someone who was married or buried by Pastor Whaley.

Yes, "times are a changin'" in Wakulla County. They now have a Winn Dixie, Super Wal-Mart and traffic. Mullet though, is still considered the "Better White Meat" and rubber boots are the Nikes of choice in Panacea. They currently have almost as many churches as boat ramps and boiled peanut stands, but nothing will ever outnumber the mosquitoes!

Still, the old ways are struggling to hold on. I had to get use to waving again to people I had never met as I drove my truck down the road and when my 4X4 Dodge Ram became stuck in a mud-hole, two "good ol' boys" were happy to pull me out (with a Ford no less!). What is changing though is the loss of folks like the Whaley's.

What's my prediction for Wakulla County? It will eventually be overcome with people from the city with their fast paced lifestyle and folks like Emmett and Celia Whaley, along with others who shaped the county's friendly lifestyle, will be known only through historical websites and books. And, who will take their places? Maybe no one, and that's the tragedy.

[Arrow Website, Wakulla County history with Emmett Whaley](#)

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[Worm Gruntin' Festival, King & Queen, Emmett & Celia Whaley](#)

**P.S.** While preparing this *Just a Thought* I received word of another spiritual father who passed away this week. Former pastor Franklin Carlton of Perry, Florida went to be with the Lord Tuesday evening after ministering at a funeral for the day. Our condolences and prayers go both to the family and to friends during this time of grief. What a comfort to know that Brother Carlton passed upon the end of a full day of ministering God's presence to others. He will be greatly missed!

*A spiritual son,*

*Chris*

