

Cloud by Day, Fire by Night

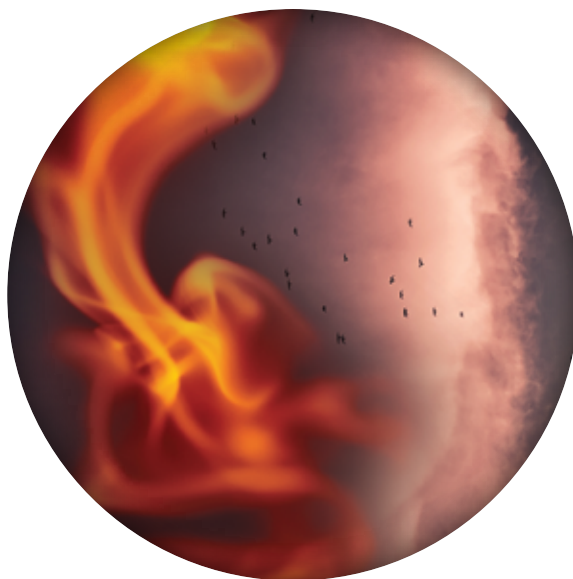
By **WILLIAM J. DUBOIS**

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I've spent most of my adult life trying to rekindle what I treasured as a young boy and unlearning what I was taught in school. That's not to say I don't appreciate the "school of life," my Ivy League education, or even growing in mind, body, soul, and spirit at a biblically grounded university. Each of these experiences taught me to explore possibilities, to think thoroughly, and to plan carefully. My privileged American education also brought with it the implication that if I pursued purpose with great diligence and effort, even being careful to glean from the best practices of others, I would eventually succeed.

But on my mother's knee, at my parents' dinner table, and in a small Spirit-filled church, I learned something wholly different. It was this: the God of Wonders, who still destroys the work of the evil one and regularly performs miracles, longs to invite us out of our bondage and into His promised land.

In 1991, while living as a missionary in Southeast Asia, the conflict between these two worldviews led to a crisis of faith and forced me to reckon with the reality that my own life didn't match what I learned as a child or the supernatural life I read about in the book of Acts. It was difficult to admit, but I was a highly trained, biblically sound, morally strong young Christian leader whose day-to-day life did not resemble the stories of Scripture. Thankfully, in that crisis moment, I met the "God of the Breakthrough" and committed to pore over Acts and dig deep into the ways of God in the Old Testament until my life and ministry resembled God's interaction



with His chosen people. Years of tests, trials, and disappointments, and being poisoned for my faith, served as a refiner's fire to shrink my personal ambitions, lessen my dependence on "best practices," and continually increase my passion to follow Him.

My mind instantly reverts to what I learned as a little boy: that the God of wonders still leads with a cloud by day and a fire by night.

Now, 30+ years later, I've been asked to carry an assignment I don't deserve and could never earn—but by His grace and leading, requires that I constantly return to what I was first shown. Today, as a co-founder of one of the world's largest families of Church Planting Movements—796 languages, 3+ million house churches, and 58+ million adults—younger leaders often ask me questions like: "What are the keys to this kind of fruitfulness?" "Have you written out best practices?" "How did you foster a culture where movements multiply movements?" "How can we replicate what you have seen?"

My mind instantly reverts to what I learned as a little boy: that the God of wonders still leads with a cloud by day and a fire by night. Yes, He demands our full obedience and the excellence of honed skills, but He

longs even more for us to embrace Him, to discover His ways, and to daily live in covenant with each other so that we learn to listen and radically obey His voice.

In fact, looking back, some of the most satisfying moments of my life have come when God has interrupted the best of my plans to connect me with other like-hearted men and women. People who value preparedness and excellence but who also share a common “all in” passion to pursue Jesus and His heart for the nations. Together, we have learned to exchange our models of ministry for a complete dependence on His direction and guidance. Practically, this means that rather than relying on any predictable model, we ask each other questions and prayerfully seek answers.

After several days of prayer, we each had the sense that the Holy Spirit was not leading us to rely on anything of the past. Instead, He was asking us to offer our lives as a sacrifice.

I still vividly remember one afternoon nearly a decade ago when I received a call from a long-time friend, asking if I would consider mobilizing teams to help rescue Middle Eastern minority peoples from ISIS terrorist fighters in Iraq and Syria. We gathered our leadership team from multiple continents and prayed a very simple prayer: “God, are you leading us to rescue people from the evils of ISIS?” Then instead of looking for resources, training leaders, or building systems, we chose to surrender all we had, yielding it into the hands of our Heavenly Father. If He wanted us to join Him in this work, we would need to take our best efforts—see them like “filthy rags”—and exchange them for His divine plan, His revelation, His boldness and courage.

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Leaders from numerous movements in Central Asia sensed they should offer their experience in rescuing orphaned children of war. African leaders, along with West Asians, felt impressed to offer training in persecution-proofing new church planting efforts. During this leadership council I was then asked if I had “the stomach to lead” our spiritual family of movements in this new endeavor. “What does that mean?” I asked. “You need to be willing to send us into the darkest places and to recognize that if we are to win the nations for Jesus, people will die. If you are not willing to lead us there, then we will not go.”

Needless to say, my education did not prepare me for his question. But from my childhood, I remembered the song “I have decided to follow Jesus,” and recalled a book I had read based on Hebrews 11:38—*Of Whom the World Was Not Worthy*. I heard the words of Revelation 12:11 ring in my heart: *They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.* What other answer could I give but an unreserved, “Yes!”

After further discussion and in keeping with the patterns of Acts 15:28, where it *seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us*, we made a covenant commitment and sent it out to experienced Church Planting Movement leaders, asking for their confirmation as well. With more prayer and commitment, volunteers soon began arriving from North Africa, the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, and the Gulf nations.

As teams were mobilized, we continued to pray, asking for God’s visible direction. We waited until we sensed *power from on high* (Acts 1:8) and then began to ask one another questions based on the patterns we had learned together from God’s Word. Because all of our cultures are so different, each question, discussion and pattern of ministry is always based on the stories and truths gleaned from God’s word. Learning together from the Old Testament, we’ve discovered that the key principle is found in listening to and obeying the voice of the Holy Spirit on every occasion, rather

than depending on or presuming that a pattern or method which worked last time would be appropriate in the next opportunity.

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We’ve learned over time to avoid following the methods which “worked” before, and instead ask questions together, and wait for an answer from the Holy Spirit and God’s Word that fits the context and is confirmed in all our hearts. Most of our questions fit into these six categories:

1. Like the story of Peter and Cornelius, *How can we understand where God might be leading and which families might be open to the move of the Holy Spirit?* From this question we deploy research and prayer teams to discern God’s leading and direction.
2. Like the story of God’s children surrounding the enemy in prayer and worship prior to the battle of Jericho, “*Where are there spiritual strongholds of darkness?*” has helped us to send “way-clearing” teams to identify spiritual strongholds.
3. Like the story of Gideon and his army learning to trust where God is leading, we ask, “*Where there seems to be spiritual openness and spiritual darkness, what kind of tools do we need to gather as evangelism teams, to relationally share God’s message to rescue people from evil?*”
4. Like the followers of David at the cave of Adullam, based on the fruitfulness of the prayer, research, way-clearing, and evangelism teams, we ask, “*Where shall we send impact teams to share the Gospel? And what type of media tools, rescue operation, or emergency relief is needed?*”

5. Like Joshua and Caleb reporting to Moses, as leaders begin to report difficulties or an openness to the Gospel, our leaders gather and ask, “*What kind of experienced church planting teams should be sent to best multiply Church Planting Movements?*”

6. Like Elijah’s school of the prophets, as the churches grow to clusters and then multiply generationally, their leaders begin to request both basic discipleship training and customized training based on local needs. Our leaders ask their peers, “*Whom should we send to launch a leadership training school that begins with spiritual formation and extends over a five-year period to advanced leadership development?*”

God honored our willingness to lose everything, our commitment to honor one another above ourselves, and our priority to pray until we could see the confirmation of His leading. We waited until the God of wonders moved with a cloud by day and fire by night. Now, years later, several of my colleagues in ministry are those we were privileged to rescue from the spiritual darkness spread through ISIS fighters. Though many lost their families, their homes, and their earthly future, they have a better home and a family whose builder and maker is God. And through the power of prayer and sacrifice we have seen God multiply His kingdom *far beyond what we could ever ask or imagine*. The work has spread generationally and from one province to many, from one region to several countries.

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Today I believe that God is calling us back to the simplicity of a childlike faith that waits for His direction and then moves courageously to free people from evil and discover His promised land.