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## *Chapter 1*

# PEOPLE POWER

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I COULD NOT BELIEVE WHAT GOD WAS TELLING ME TO do. I kept pacing the floor in my place of prayer where I had determined to spend a week alone with God. And I kept resisting Him.

“But Lord, what you’re telling me to do is unsanctioned and dangerous,” I said. “We could be shot. The government might bring their tanks out. People might be killed. At the very least our reputation in Ukraine could be ruined.”

But God was not budging. During that entire week I spent in prayer, His answer to me remained the same: He wanted my church to openly protest against our government in Kyiv.

In my mind this was not just foolish, it was dangerous. It was like declaring war on the government. We could be treated harshly, jailed, or shot, as had happened to protesters in the past.

Even though Ukraine was not officially communist anymore, the people of the nation still lived under a mind-set of oppression. For many years the Soviet Union had taught the Ukrainian people to unquestionably submit to authority. Though the Soviet Union was gone, people still couldn't imagine a government that respected them. So the government felt free to treat people as sheep and servants. There was no accountability in the leadership as there is in a democracy. Leaders were as corrupt as they wanted to be, and the people simply accepted it as the way things would always be. They continued to hide their thoughts and feelings deep down inside and pretended to agree with the government. Even though Ukraine had become independent more than a decade earlier, people still feared that the persecutions and concentration camps of the Soviet era would somehow return.

As a result there were no protests and few peaceful gatherings in Ukraine. People did not want to provoke the government. They were fatalistic. The country was frozen in place. Nobody dared step out of line. The underlying threat of violence or hardship against anyone who promoted what the government deemed "social upheaval" was well understood. Groups that gathered without government approval could be met with bullets and tanks, prison terms, harassment, or at least the scorn of the country. It was one thing for a political group to protest, but it was an entirely different thing for a church to bring out its people in a mass protest.

For us, a church already viewed with suspicion by many Ukrainians, any hint of civil disobedience was very risky. Pastoring an evangelical church in Ukraine and other Eastern European countries is a delicate tightrope walk between a hostile culture, suspicious government leaders, a highly educated atheist elite, and unjust laws that keep your church disenfranchised. Ukraine prizes itself on its

educational system, all atheist based, that has produced fourteen Nobel Prize winners. As the motherland of the Orthodox church, Ukraine people are conditioned to believe that the Orthodox church is the only true church, an emblem of their culture more than a place to worship God, and that other churches are cults, foreign interlopers, even cover organizations for spies. We had fought that impression for years by working peacefully in Ukraine and serving the people. We started a soup kitchen that fed two thousand people daily—more than a million people overall. We raised up businessmen in the church through our business training programs. We held marriage preparation courses, counseling for unwed mothers, and men’s conferences that helped to create strong families and a more stable society. We worked in AIDS prevention and drug rehabilitation, helping three thousand people to become free from addictions. We were curing many of society’s ills without a penny of government money. We were doing the work of God without posing a threat to anyone. We were serving Ukraine in love.

But our country still treated us with suspicion and made laws to constrain us. In fact, we were facing a crisis at that moment because as a “cult” we were told we were not allowed to buy land, even though ours was the largest evangelical church in all of Europe. Imagine having a church of thousands and being barred from building your own sanctuary. That was our situation (and it continues to be the situation for many or most evangelical churches in the former Soviet Union). The Orthodox church and its allies in the government had painted us as an army of zombies and accused me of being a charismatic leader who kept the church members hypnotized. Never mind that the Embassy of God fed more people than the city government of Kyiv and that all our

efforts were making the country more stable and prosperous. We were still labeled a threat to Ukraine's national identity.

We had avoided direct confrontation with the government for a decade, but then our building lease came up for renewal, and the government decided to kick us out so they could renovate the property. We had nowhere else to go. No place was large enough. Bulldozers were parked outside our current facility, waiting to move in. Soon we were forced to meet outside in the rain and snow for our services. The largest church in Europe had become homeless.

At the beginning of the crisis I had done what I always did—I went to God. He had never failed me, and I knew He would have our solution. I wasn't the least bit worried, but as I prayed, I received no answer. God seemed silent. I prayed for months, then for a full year, as the tractors moved in and our lease expired and the building's owners shut off the plumbing. Our people began to wonder where we would go. Still, God gave me no guidance on the subject. His silence shook me more than anything. I could handle government oppression—I had been dealing with that since I had come to the Soviet Union in the 1980s. I could handle crises involving our church location. We had moved often, changing locations half a dozen times in one five-year period. We had bounced all around the city—and still had grown. Man-made problems didn't alarm me. But the silence of God did. Where was my ever-present help? What had I done wrong?

Finally, His reply came during a time of intense prayer: "Stand up to the city government. Don't let them shove you around anymore." His answer challenged me to my core. I was so unprepared to accept it that I cleared my schedule and took another

week in prayer to make sure I had heard correctly. I prayed all day for seven days, and God's message to me did not change. He was preparing us to have a bigger impact than I had anticipated. We just had to learn to listen.

## PEOPLE POWER

God told me to take our church to the streets of Kyiv in protest. "The people are the power," He said. "Use the power you have." Such a move was unprecedented in Ukraine. But God opened my eyes to see that to complete the Great Commission, we must have impact upon nations, not just people in churches. Transforming nations requires bold steps. We could no longer be concerned with just preserving what we had or adding numbers to our congregation; we were being called to move strongly into every sphere of society. That included using methods we had never considered, like public protest.

My views on civil disobedience were traditional and conservative. I believed Christians were never to disobey or demonstrate against the government but rather to humbly submit to it because it bears God's authority and power to punish. I was not afraid of the punishment, but I certainly wanted to obey God, and so I taught myself and my people to honor the government and comply with its laws.

But in that place of prayer, alone and broken, God showed me I was wrong. He took me through the Book of Acts and showed me that civil disobedience can be righteous when you are fighting unrighteousness. He showed me how the disciples had disobeyed the law when the law prohibited them from preaching in the name

of Jesus. (See Acts 5.) I had never seen that as civil disobedience before, but now I did. Not only did they disobey the law, but also God backed them up in it. In our situation, even though peaceful demonstrations were allowed by law, we still needed special permission from the government to conduct such a protest. Those special permissions were never issued.

I left that time of prayer sure of what I needed to do. God's message rang in my ears: "The people are the power. Use the people."

I announced to our church leaders what we had to do, and many of them rejected it out of hand.

"That's suicide," said one.

"It's unbiblical," said a few others.

I had already girded myself, knowing I would have to do battle with my friends before fighting the real battle in the streets of Kyiv. Then I told the church what I believed God wanted us do. Letters of resignation arrived on my desk almost immediately. "We have families and businesses," people wrote. "We are afraid. We don't want the government to clamp down on us like in communist times."

To try to restore unity, I told the church leadership to take a week off and seek God for an answer. These twelve men did that, and they came back with a confirmation of what God had told me. They were as astonished as I had been, and now they too were preparing for the battle to come. God was about to teach us one of the most important lessons to influence a nation, which is: you will never accomplish it if you remain within the four walls of the church.

Through it all we were discovering what the Great Commission really means. God had been teaching us that our mission as believers is to save nations, not just evangelize individuals and build

churches. God is not terribly concerned with church size and church ministries. These are all sidelights to His main goal, which is for all nations to walk after Him in kingdom principles. The church fulfills its mandate when it changes society, not when it's confined to its sanctuary and Sunday school classrooms. The church is to build the kingdom of God in a nation. The kingdom must overflow into streets and workplaces, governments and entertainment venues. That is its nature, to grow and take over. If you try to keep it to yourself, you lose it.

And we didn't want to lose it.

## CHURCH-FOCUSED CHURCHES

Too many Christians and Christian leaders spend their energy, creativity, and precious time promoting churches instead of the kingdom. They work for the success of their church, or perhaps for a group of churches in their city, or they work for their ministry or denomination. They believe that by building churches and ministries they are building the kingdom. They think *church* and *kingdom* are practically synonymous. This isolation of the church from the world has led to ineffectiveness and failure to carry out the Great Commission.

But the church is not the kingdom. Jesus said in Luke 17:21, "Nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you." It's not confined to temples and churches. No church can contain or control the kingdom of God. The kingdom is meant to inhabit the entire earth, not just your church sanctuary.

The Great Commission is not what many of us have understood it to be. We have understood it to be evangelism—bringing people from the world into our church buildings. But the Great Commission mandate is to go out and disciple nations. The focus is not *in here*, but *out there*. This was Jesus’s goal in coming to Earth. It is supposed to be our goal as redeemed people. The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19 says:

Go and make disciples of all nations.

Jesus did not say, “Go and build great churches.” He did not even say, “Go and save individuals.” He never said, “May thy church come on Earth as it is in heaven.” Neither did He say, “Seek ye first the church and all its righteousness.” Rather, His heartbeat is for nations to be ruled by kingdom principles. That is the calling of every believer and of every church.

So why has our attention been lavished on personal evangelism and building churches? The problem is our mind-set. We often forget that the kingdom has come. We forget we have been called to rule our promised lands—and to rule nations. We forget about the power we received from Jesus Christ. So our attention is drawn to churches. Building a church seems much more manageable than transforming a nation.

My own religious background taught me that the kingdom of God was all about heaven, not Earth. I thought kingdom work took place after we die, once we had passed over into the kingdom. I misread the Bible and the words of Jesus. I made the kingdom of God all about the future, and so my focus and purpose in life were off course. I was having little impact on the world around me. But

because God wanted to do something in Ukraine that was much bigger than our “big church” or me, He graciously taught us to take a proactive position in society, to go outside our building and enforce His authority over an ungodly nation and government.

Today many people sit in church pews hoping to make it to the kingdom of God, and they don’t realize that, according to Jesus, the kingdom is here and now. Nobody has to die to see the kingdom. We are as close as we will ever get. Jesus didn’t leave the kingdom of God in heaven when He came to Earth. He brought it with Him. The born-again believer is in the kingdom at this moment. We can stop hoping for it—it came two thousand years ago, and it is present with us now.

When we forget that the kingdom is here and now, we shrink from our calling to disciple nations. We want to use the church as our escape hatch from the world’s problems. The battle is certainly fierce, but God is sending Christians not to hide out in, or even build, churches but to have impact in their lives and on the nations of the world. If you are trying only to build a church, your goal is wrong. The promise of God is, “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance” (Ps. 2:8).

Imagine that! We are meant to inherit nations. We are responsible not for sanctuaries and Sunday school rooms but for our nations. We are not separate from our nations in God’s sight. We belong to nations. God will hold us responsible for nations. We cannot flee into the church and think our hands will be washed clean of all that happens outside. We are called to the world to restore the kingdom. And if there is any nation that is suffering under a godless culture, it’s because Christians have not subdued it with kingdom principles. God did not answer our church’s many prayers to resolve our

problem of having a place of worship because He had something bigger in mind—the salvation of the nation, not just providing a new place for us to gather.

Some people believe that if they work in the nursery or sing in the choir, they are fulfilling their area of ministry. But this is not really ministry. It is merely housekeeping. Your work as a choir member, nursery volunteer, or usher is what we all must do to keep the church functioning, but it is not necessarily fulfilling the Great Commission. The Great Commission happens outside the church. Ministry is what you do to bring your life and your sphere of influence under kingdom rule.

## THE KINGDOM-DRIVEN CHURCH

Church has never been the focus of the Great Commission, but it has always been the most important tool for carrying out the Great Commission. The church is the primary vehicle God uses to train people so they know how to find their promised land and rule in their nation. Church is the headquarters, but battles are not fought at headquarters. They are fought in the field.

First Timothy 3:15 calls the church the pillar and foundation of the truth. It upholds the kingdom by being the school, the equipping place, and the place of support for world changers. But our focus must remain outside, not inside. We are to go from the “school” into the world and bring the powerful kingdom principles to bear on its problems.

When Christians change the goal of the church and make it a place of conservation and escape rather than equipping and sending, we are working against the Great Commission. We

are conserving crowds, not sending them out. We are hoarding kingdom resources, namely, people and their gifts. In many churches, God's workers are in captivity. They are like prisoners and the pastors are the wardens.

We are not called to huddle inside the church sanctuary but to restore the kingdom of God to the world. But some Christians and preachers misinterpret the word *ecclesia*, the Greek word for "church," which means literally "called-out ones." They mistakenly believe it means we are to be "called away from the world." This is a grave error. Jesus said in John 17:15, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one."

As a church we are "called out" from the evil principles of this world, but we are still required to live here. We are not built for monasteries. Our calling is to operate from a different and superior set of principles than the world we live in. The church is to train us to be Christlike, to embody Jesus and His principles, so that in everyday life we may operate from a godly perspective. That's what the church is for. That's why we come on Sunday. That's why we preach, teach, and worship together.

God holds the church responsible for societies. It is the most potent organization in the world because it was started by Jesus and is His bride. No other entity in the world is as important as the church, in spite of all its failures; it is the hope of God because through it, and only it, the kingdom can come.

But the church is only relevant on Earth. It is irrelevant in heaven. When the church gets to heaven, it will become one with Christ. So the task of the church is here and now to bring the kingdom to Earth. Churches come and go, but the kingdom is everlasting.

Our focus must be on the kingdom and on redeeming nations. The church is to be the training ground for people who will impact the society around them.

As I and the people in my church began to grasp our kingdom calling, our fear melted away. We decided to take the massive risk and march on city hall, even in the face of danger. “The people are the power,” God had told me. It was time to take that power to the streets. Little did we know that this act of obedience to a divine instruction from heaven, though unconventional, would go a long way to shaping the history of our nation.

As we obeyed, we learned impacting principles that we had never discovered before. I will share them with you now. It’s what I call “churchshift.”

# KINGDOM PRINCIPLES FROM CHAPTER 1

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1. The church fulfills its mandate when it changes society, not when it is confined to its sanctuary and Sunday school classrooms.
2. This isolation of the church from the world has led to ineffectiveness and failure to carry out the Great Commission.
3. The Great Commission mandate is to go out and disciple nations.
4. Ministry is what you do to bring your life and your sphere of influence under kingdom rule.
5. We are not called to huddle inside the church sanctuary but to restore the kingdom of God to the world.
6. God holds the church responsible for societies.
7. The church is to be the training ground for people who will impact the society around them.