

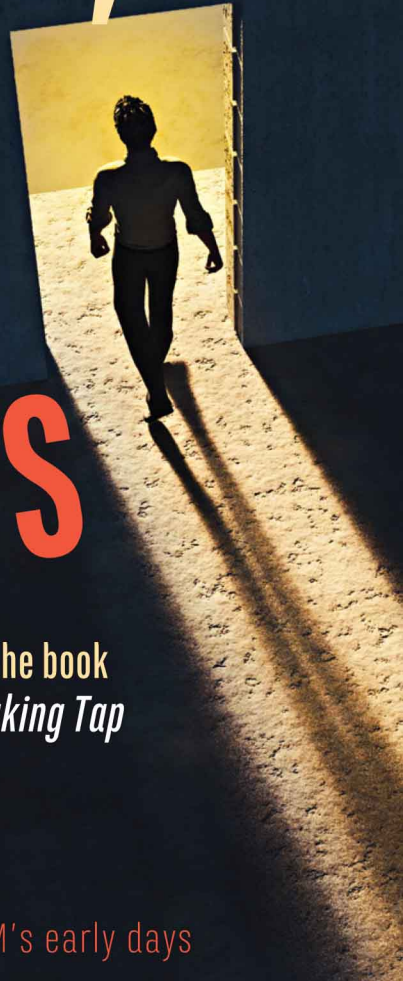
GEORGE VERWER, D.D.

Speaking from the heart

FAILURE,
THE
BACK DOOR
TO
SUCCESS

Chapter 3 from the book
Drops from a Leaking Tap

A quick and brief history of OM's early days



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Good Shepherd

BOOKS

HYDERABAD

Failure, the Back Door to Success
by George Verwer

This booklet is Chapter 3 from the book, *Drops from A Leaking Tap*.
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Failure, the Back Door to Success

The KGB officer in charge of my interrogation said I was a spy. “We have a place for American spies,” he told me. “It’s called Siberia.”

Things were not going well. The Soviets had our vehicle. They were interrogating my partner, Roger, in another room. It was just a matter of time before they would discover the Bibles and the printing press we had smuggled into the heart of the Communist world.

It was 1961 and the Cold War was in full swing. My dream of taking the Gospel into closed countries—not to mention my life—could come to a very quick end. What to do?

Anybody who knew me wouldn’t be surprised at the predicament I was in. People called me a radical. Ever since my

conversion in 1955 at a Billy Graham meeting in New York City, I was diving head first into any opportunity I could find to share the gospel. Shortly after my conversion I got a chance to speak to the entire student body of my high school, and used it to share Jesus. I shared my faith going door to door. I organized rallies—600 people came to one rally, 125 professed their faith in Christ (including my own father). In 1957 I arranged to get people to the Billy Graham meeting literally by the busload, but I myself did not attend the crusade. Since every seat was taken, I did not want to take a seat that could be occupied by a non-Christian. So, while Billy Graham preached in Madison Square Garden, I went out into the streets of New York City and preached. Then later, with two friends, I took off to evangelize Mexico.

It just made sense. Why not go to some place where people haven't heard the gospel?

In those days, Mexico was a semi-closed country. Protestants were persecuted. Importing Christian literature was illegal. Our car was loaded with literature and we had no idea how we were going to get across the border. But we got across. We prayed much, stuffed the literature under our mattresses, crossed the border at night, and they waved us through.

We worked among people living in the garbage dumps. The enormous poverty witnessed there gripped me. As I watched flies crawling across the eyes of little babies, my heart cried out to God: "What can I do to awaken this nation to the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ?" We decided to get on the radio. There was only one problem, in Mexico Christian radio was illegal. I thought, there's got to be a way around this!

I returned to the United States, transferred from the liberal arts college to Moody Bible Institute, organized a team of five and headed back to Mexico. Before we left we prayed and when we got to Mexico, God gave us a plan. We started a bookstore and went to the local radio station saying, “We represent a bookstore and we want to advertise. We sell Bibles. The reason why people don’t buy the Bible is that they don’t know what’s in it. We’d like to read from it in our advertisement.” It worked. We read and explained the Scriptures over Mexican radio. That was the beginning of a weekly 15-minute program.

Back at Moody, I prayed, planned, organized and read missionary books. I dreamed about getting into countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. There was hardly any Christian there—it was the perfect opportunity!

I didn’t want romance to derail me, so I went on what I called a “social fast” (seeking God’s choice)—No dating! That lasted for two years. Then one day I met Drena a staff member at Moody. My social fast ended immediately. I was in love!

I wanted to make sure that Drena shared my radical commitment to world missions and so on our first meeting I said to her, “Probably nothing is going to happen between us, but I’m going to be a missionary, and if you marry me, you’ll probably end up being eaten by cannibals in New Guinea.”

She was definitely not in love with me, but I persisted. Eventually, we got engaged. I never wanted to spend any money, because I wanted even the smallest coin of money to go to the gospel. “Why buy meals when Moody provides them” was my mindset. One day when we were out together sitting by Lake Michigan (I often skipped meals, but I didn’t think it was right to ask her to

skip a meal), I asked the Lord if he would somehow supply food for her without us having to spend any money. The people sitting behind us were having a picnic, they packed up and left. I went to the wastebasket, pulled out the brown paper bag which they discarded, and discovered a sandwich which was not unwrapped. I gave it to my fiancée. She got a real taste of what she was getting married to!

We were married in Milwaukee in 1960¹ just after I graduated. At that time, I hardly believed in marriage ceremonies, so we had our wedding after the Sunday morning church service so that the pastor could preach the gospel to the non-Christians present. During the reception, my close friend Dale Rhoton, stood up and said, “The main thing you can give George and Drena is prayer, because they are selling everything else for the sake of the gospel.”²

We skipped the honeymoon and headed to Mexico. On our way, we decided not to spend any money. The first night I took our wedding cake to a gas station in Wheaton, offering the cake for gas. They filled the tank and let me keep the cake. The next morning, another station owner too—a Christian—let me keep the cake. The next guy was not so generous, he liked the cake and

¹ I finished in two years by transferring some credits and taking some courses by correspondence. I remember sitting in the bus station, supposedly on a date with Drena, working on correspondence courses.

² I have since come to see that giving away everything for the sake of the gospel can turn into a twisted and legalistic rule. Some, for example, feel it is unspiritual to maintain an attractive home, but I have found that a beautiful (though not extravagant) home can be a good witness to our neighbors of the joy we have in Jesus Christ.

we traded the cake for gas. We got all the way to Mexico without spending a cent.

Over the next six months we opened bookstores and evangelized. Then we moved to another closed country, Spain. Spain, under Franco, had little toleration for gospel. So we made it our home base, while I studied Russian and prepared to launch into the Soviet Union.

The plan for the Soviet Union was simple. Roger Malstead and I smuggled Scripture portions and a printing press in. Then we planned to mail the Gospels to addresses taken from the phone book. Things were going well, until I accidentally spilled melted butter on one of the Gospels, rendering it unusable.

“Flush it down the toilet,” Roger suggested.

But I hated wasting that Scripture. “I know what to do,” I thought, “I’ll find some isolated spot in the countryside where no one can see us, and I’ll throw it out the window. Then someone can pick it up and read it!”

That was a big mistake. Someone did see us. Within ten miles, we were stopped at a major roadblock and arrested as spies. They interrogated us for two days. I decided to tell them the truth. When they found the printing press and all our other literature hidden in our car, they freaked out.

We were the headline news in Soviet Russia. *Pravda* liked the story so much that they ran it again ten years later.

At the time of our interrogation, the Russians had just put their first person in outer space. The interrogator said to me, “Look, we’ve had our spaceman up there, looking around, and we didn’t find your God.” After two days they were convinced

that we were religious fanatics and not CIA operatives. With a submachine—gun guard, they escorted us to the Austrian border.

My goal, aim and desire was to get the Gospel into closed countries. We just went into one of the most closed countries on earth and promptly got kicked out. “What is God doing?” I wondered. I decided it was time to pray. I climbed a tree on a mountain in Austria to get alone so I could pray. I spent the day in prayer.

That day revolutionized my life and my ministry. God showed me that my vision was too small. He showed me that my job was to mobilize the church, and he wanted me to start with the European Church. It made sense, Europeans could drive to the closed countries. Americans, on the other hand, needed to cross the Atlantic before they could get to most of the countries they wanted to reach. The amount of money needed to get one American into a closed country could get two or three Europeans into the same place. Even after they got there, Europeans were usually better received than Americans.

Little did I know that this was to be the forerunner of a radical change that was to take place in the whole of mission thinking. This concept exploded from Europe to Asia and to Africa and then to Latin America. People from all different countries became equal partners in the mission work.

God gave me a name—the name that has stuck Operation Mobilisation—OM.

God also showed me how to mobilize the church—bringing people together for a summer, for two years and to send them on outreaches. Then sending them back to their home churches or

to another mission agency to energize, revitalize the church and spread the vision.

That was 1961. Short-term mission trips were almost unheard of. It was a revolutionary concept, but it worked.

The next summer we recruited 200 volunteers. By the second summer in 1963, our group grew to 2,000, reaching 25 million people. We moved to London, where we assembled a fleet of 120 old trucks. We crossed the English Channel, split up into teams, and drove out to reach the unreached. Within a year of my arrest in the Soviet Union, we were sending Europeans back to the USSR who spoke fluent Russian and could accomplish more than I ever could.

We focused on getting into closed countries. That's why I sent Dale Rhoton to check out Afghanistan. "While you're in the neighborhood," I said, "you might as well check out Pakistan and India." I honestly didn't expect much to come from it. I knew missionaries were operating in West Pakistan, and I had already met vibrant Christians from India. Since India's strong churches were reaching India, I figured that country didn't need us. But Dale told me otherwise. "India needs us," he said.

So we sent two teams to India. They drove out to India in old trucks encountering all kinds of problems getting there. I felt responsible, since I myself had recruited many of these team members. So in late 1963, I flew to India to see how things were going.

India shook me. I traveled around in trains, evangelizing and giving out tracts. I was blown away by the needs of the people in villages and towns. I said to my wife, "We are moving to India."

We lived in Bombay. People were drawn to our radical message about discipleship, forsaking all, world mission and prayer. Rather than feeling we needed to import a foreign missionary every time we wanted to get something done, we partnered with the church in India and supported nationals in ministry.

Our work exploded and then I got kicked out of the country. So we moved to Kathmandu as Indians could come to see me there without a visa. We specialized in leadership training and also started the work in Nepal.

Logistics were becoming a challenge. Driving old trucks back and forth across Europe and Asia wasn't working quite so well. As I prayed about this and looked at the globe, I was struck with how much water there is on the surface of the earth.

Then I felt we needed a ship!

When I shared the idea with the churches in Europe, some laughed. To some, owning a ship seemed like an extravagance. But the more I prayed about it, the more I was convinced that God wanted us to own a ship and I wanted it as soon as possible. Impatience, admittedly, is one of my failings, and God dealt with it by making me wait. We waited for six long years before our first ship, the 2,319-ton *Logos* set sail in 1971 from England to India.

In those days we didn't believe in fund raising. We thought we should follow the example of Hudson Taylor and George Mueller—never to make our needs publicly known, pray privately and trust God to supply.³ When we signed a contract to purchase

³ In recent years, we have come to believe that we should show our esteem for our partners in the local church by sharing our needs with them so they can join us in prayer and in giving.

Umanak (which became the *Logos*), we had enough money to make a deposit, but not enough to complete the purchase. We prayed, God supplied, and by the deadline we had the exact amount to complete the purchase and have the ship towed to dry dock where it could be overhauled and painted.

Though it was exciting to finally have our ship, once we had it, the full reality of it began to sink in. In fact, we nearly shook with fear when we realized the dangers of the ship project—an old vessel, no insurance, all those young people aboard with their parents hovering anxiously in the background. I used to have nightmares about the ship going down, and would wake up thinking, “Let’s keep it in the warmer climates, so that if it does sink at least the kids will have a chance. If you go down in cold seas, there’s far less hope.”⁴

Despite our anxieties, the ship ministry became more than we ever expected. We acquired a second, larger ship (the *Doulos*), and the two became floating bookstores and literature centers, as well as launching pads for short-term missions. Staffed by 400 volunteers from 40–50 nations, our ships have visited ports all over the world from India to Jamaica and from Egypt to Communist China.

Operation Mobilisation has grown to 4,000 full-time staff plus another 3,000–4,000 short-term people during any one year. 130,000 people have been trained in OM representing many denominations. Over 100 mission agencies trace their birth to their founders or leaders having been in OM. Our literature ministry, *Send the Light* (STL), in the UK became now a separate

⁴George Verwer, *No Turning Back*, OM Lit., Waynesboro, GA, USA, pp. 70–71.

ministry growing with over 1000 employees and 50 bookstores. We are in over 100 countries, including some of the limited and difficult accessible nations across the world. And have become a much more holistic ministry. In the last ten years, we have put flesh and bone on the compassion of Jesus by reaching out to victims of earthquakes, floods, war and poverty—meeting physical as well as spiritual needs.

This growth has been a direct and exhilarating answer to prayer. No one accomplishes anything without God. We also certainly did not get into closed countries without much prayer. We have also seen personal answers to prayer. My wife's father was killed in World War II. Her stepfather asked her to leave home because he was anti-Christian. Yet, after 25 years of prayer, he came to Christ.

At Moody we were known as the group that was always praying. This was back in the late 1950's when praying in small groups was unheard of. While I'm sure others were birthing this practice of praying in small groups at the same time, this approach has spread like a phenomenon all over the world. Now it's part of our culture. In 1958 we started the practice of meeting for a half night in prayer—a practice that has continued for forty-three years.

I believe in and practice prayer. I trust God answers prayer. Yet unanswered or seemingly unanswered prayer is one of the great altars upon which God makes true men and women. My life is full of unanswered prayers. Not even 50 percent of my prayers have been answered not yet at least.⁵

⁵ George Verwer, *No Turning Back*, OM Lit., Waynesboro, GA, USA, p. 104.

I aim high as I believe in a great and powerful God. When my hopes, dreams and prayers are not realized, I get discouraged. In fact, all my life I have struggled with discouragement. But I stand on the promises of God. I have determined to never let the sun go down on my discouragement. That can be a challenge.

We have certainly faced difficult times. Just before midnight on January 4, 1988, the Logos struck a rock in the Beagle Channel at the southern tip of South America. All 139 persons aboard (including a six-month-old baby), were evacuated, and the ship went down.

On the evening of August 10, 1991, two young OM workers were killed when terrorists threw a grenade into a meeting we were holding in Zamboanga, Philippines. An OM worker was kidnapped by Afghans and never heard from him again. Another worker was shot in Turkey. I don't know why these things happened. There is a mystery in suffering that we will never fully understand.

I am not the same person I was in 1960. Yes, I am still eager to share the gospel, but God has had to change me and my ideas. Many of us trained in Bible school back in the 1950's had a Pharisee streak—a grace-killing streak. Our ideas about money, prayer and evangelism and our man-made rules became the measuring line to see how spiritual we were. We were judgmental, even when we tried not to be, our body language gave us away.

I was so focused, so zealous, so determined that I used to walk right by people without acknowledging them. Many times I was too hard on my wife. God confronted me about this, even from the very first month of our marriage when I hurt my wife and I saw her sitting and crying. God used the ministry of men like

Oswald J. Smith and Roy Hession to bring me back, weeping, to the cross.

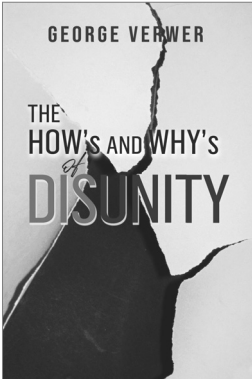
God showed me that 1 Corinthians 13 (the *Love* chapter) was for us, the most important chapter in the Bible. Though I believe in world missions and radical commitment, these things mean nothing if we don't have Christ's love.

We need big-heartedness. We need what Charles Swindoll calls a "grace awakening." We need balanced, consistent Christianity.

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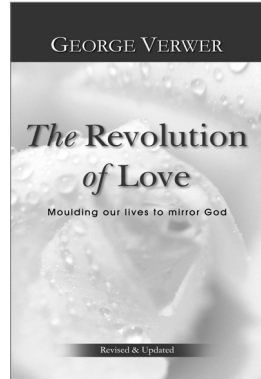
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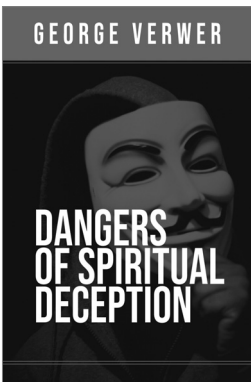
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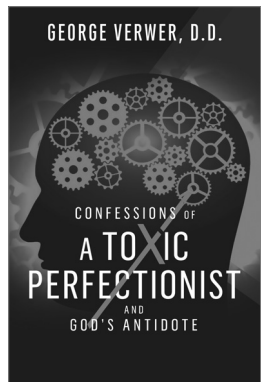
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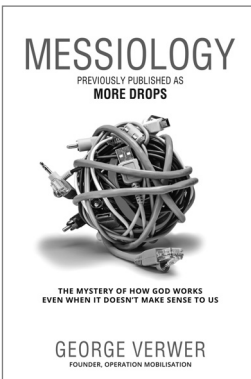
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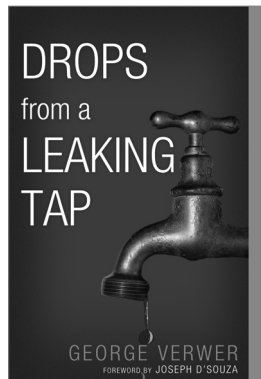
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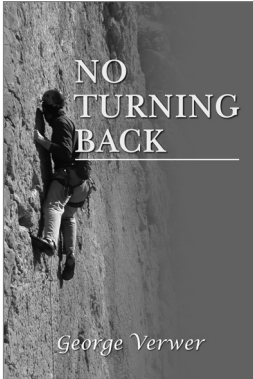
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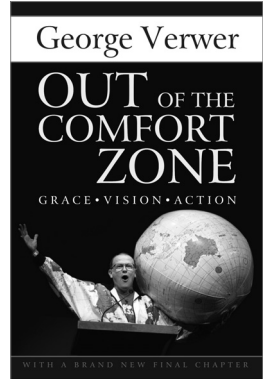
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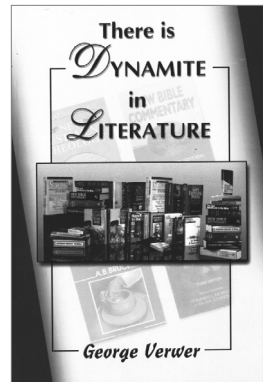
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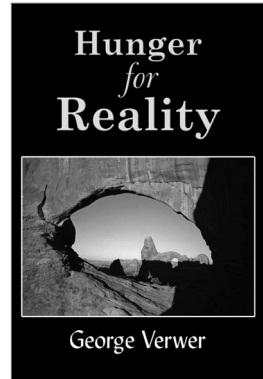
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GEORGE VERWER, D.D. is the Founder and former International Director of Operation Mobilisation, which is a ministry of evangelism, discipleship, training and church planting. He led this work from its inception in 1957 through to August 2003 when he handed over the leadership, though not retiring from the work of ministry. He and his wife, Drena, make their home in London, England. Their two sons, one daughter and grandchildren live in Britain and the United States.



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