

LIBERTY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE ROLE OF PREACHING IN
REVITALIZING DECLINING CHURCHES

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ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF PREACHING IN TURNING AROUND DECLINING CHURCHES

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A review of current literature demonstrates that very little material is available to assist Pastors in declining churches, develop a preaching plan to effect turn around in their church. The purpose of this project is to explore various styles of preaching and decide what style is biblical and most effective in reviving a declining church. This project also explores the causes and needs of the declining church so as to determine what subjects need to be addressed by the pastor of the declining church.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is certain that there are more mega churches in the world than ever before. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research defines mega church as a congregation that has a sustained average attendance of 2,000 or more in worship. There are over 12,000 of these churches in the United States. There are also several of these large gatherings in Korea, Brazil, and some African countries.¹ Some have grown and continue to grow at an exponential rate. Yet, most churches in the world are no where near mega church size. Most Southern Baptist churches have 100-150 members and that is not to mention the small percentage of members that attend on a regular basis. Seventy percent of all Southern Baptists are in churches with fewer than 400 members. Churches with more than 1,000 members account for only eight percent of all churches.²

Many of these smaller churches find themselves in a position of desperation. They are at a plateau or in decline. There are a number of churches that are experiencing decline because of a low number of baptisms, while others have a problem with the proverbial “back door.” It is a well known fact in the Southern Baptist Convention that baptismal numbers are down. It is also true that many churches suffer from members and attendees leaving the church. Thom Rainer wrote:

¹“Megachurch Definition,” Hartford Institute for Religion Research, available from <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/org/megachurchesdefinition.html>; Internet; accessed 13 July 2006.

²Phillip B. Jones, “Analysis of Southern Baptist Churches by Size of Churches,” *Research Report* (North American Mission Board, sbc nov, 1998).

For as long as I have been in ministry, I have heard church leaders talk about “back door” problems. While the “front door” refers to new members or gains in attendance, the “back door” typically means loss of members or decreases in attendance. I have spoken with leaders of numerous denominations and independent churches, and the problem seems to be alarmingly common in American churches. People are leaving our churches by the thousands each day, and others are quietly becoming less and less active.³

The decline of the modern church has brought great concern to this author. Some assert that the answer is to start new churches. The rationale is that new churches are more effective in reaching people with the Gospel than churches that already exist. While that very well might be the case, it is the conviction of this author that something can be done to remedy the problem of declining churches.

Not only is the topic of declining churches an issue in this present culture, but the subject of preaching is of utmost importance as well. There is controversy over what kind or style of preaching is effective, to whether or not preaching is relevant in this modern culture. While there is more to turning around a declining church than preaching, it is the author’s conviction that preaching plays a major role in the process.

Problem

This project is the development of a preaching plan that will aid declining and plateau churches. It will explore what preaching is and how if done correctly it can turn a church around in a positive way. While preaching is not the only need of a declining church, it is without a doubt an important one. When a new pastor of one of these churches begins his ministry he needs to know where to begin. This project will at least provide him with some direction in the area of preaching, not just preaching, but the most

³Thom S. Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 1.

productive style of preaching.

A project of this sort is necessary to assist the many churches in North America that are not living up to their God given potential. Pastors of declining churches are often ill prepared with what to do when they assume the responsibility of shepherding such a congregation. They may know how to exegete a text, put together a homiletic outline, make hospital visits, and even bring comfort to the bereaved; But do they know how to preach to affect turn around in desperate churches?

As the pastor of a church that has experienced decline for several years, the author will experience personal growth and development in knowing how to strategically develop a preaching plan for maximum impact. As pastor for the last three years the author has led in and observed a certain amount of turn around. This project will help the author examine what he has done well, as well as what he could have done differently.

Limitations

A project of this sort can be misunderstood without some disclaimers. It is not the author's intent to imply that preaching is the only issue that needs to be addressed in the context of a declining church. There are several other important issues to address as it relates to declining churches. There are several things that effective churches do and must do well in order to thrive. To focus on preaching and to neglect these other important elements could be detrimental to the health and progress of the church. These other areas of importance include a prayer ministry, Sunday School (small group), worship style, doctrine, atmosphere, and other areas as well. Yet these issues will not be

discussed in any sort of detail. The purpose of this project is to focus on preaching as it relates to turning around a troubled church.

This project will not discuss issues connected to the pastor's personal, devotional, moral or ethical life. It should be understood that to preach in any fashion without having integrity in these areas will render the preacher ineffective. The pastor's interpersonal skills outside of the pulpit will not be addressed either, yet it is of utmost importance for the preacher to be able to relate well to people outside of the pulpit if he is to make an impact from the pulpit. Many preachers fail as a pastor, not because they are not effective communicators or able administrators, but because they lack in the area of social skills. Leadership skills are also important if the preacher is going to lead turn around. Without proper leadership skills the congregation may not take the preacher's preaching ministry serious. Another area of importance, yet not in the scope of the author's purpose, is the detailed steps of preparing a sermon. Having hermeneutical and homiletical skills are important for the preacher. He needs to be able to interpret scripture properly and present it in a way that a congregation can follow and understand. This project focuses primarily on what the best kind of preaching is and how it can help bring about change in a declining church.

Theological Basis

This project addresses the areas of biblical theology, church growth, church retention, church health and evangelism.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

The power of preaching or proclaiming God's Word in order to turn things around spiritually is definitely a biblical concept. This is especially seen in the expanse of the church in the book of Acts. On the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter two many lives were turned around in response to Peter preaching God's Word. Acts 2:40-46 states:

And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. (NKJV)

When the apostle Paul went to Thessalonica and preached there was an amazing turn around that took place. Paul and the Apostles were even accused of turning the world upside down by their preaching. It is certain that turning the world upside down constitutes turn around.

Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scripture, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas. But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason and sought to bring them out to the people. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too." (Acts 17:2-6)

There are several other passages in the Bible that address the power of preaching to bring about change. Isaiah 55:10-11 pictures the proclamation of God's Word as a powerful

force that accomplishes a purpose. Just like precipitation has a strategic purpose when it falls so does the Word and just like precipitation accomplishes something when it falls so does the Word when it is preached.

For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, And do not return there,
But water the earth, and bring forth and bud, That it may give seed to the sower And
bread to the eater, So shall My word be that goes from my mouth; It shall not return
to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing
for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

According to 1Corinthians 1:21 preaching is the means that God uses to save the lost. In Romans 17:14-17 Paul wrote about the need for preachers and the power of preaching to bring about faith. It states:

How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “LORD, who has believed our report?” So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

CHURCH GROWTH

Not only does this project address biblical theology but it also relates to church growth. In relationship to church growth Thom Rainer wrote a book called *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*. In his research for this book Rainer asks the formerly unchurched what factors led them to a particular church. Rainer found that an overwhelming number of the formerly unchurched came back to particular church a second time because they liked the pastor and his preaching.⁴ When the formerly

⁴ Thom S. Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 54.

unchurched were asked, “Did the pastor and his preaching play a part in your coming to the church?” over 97% answered yes.⁵ Rainer wrote:

We asked the open ended question, “What factors led you to choose this church?” The responses, noted in the previous chapter, show that facts related to the pastor and preaching were the most-often mentioned answers. Indeed, without any prompting from our interviewers, the formerly unchurched told us nine out of ten times that the pastor was key in their entering the ranks of the church.⁶

What then were the issues related to the pastor? What specifically did he say or do that significantly influenced the unchurched? In most of the interviews, the respondents told us not only that the pastor influenced them, but they also shared how he influenced them. Eight particular issues were mentioned frequently.⁷

The eight things that were mentioned in order of importance are preaching that teaches, preaching that applies to my life, authenticity of the pastor, pastor’s conviction, personal contact by pastor, pastor is a good communicator, pastor is a leader and pastors class.

CHURCH RETENTION

This project addresses church retention. Since many churches struggle with retaining members and/or attendees it is important to realize how preaching can affect the so called issue of “closing the back door.” Preaching is one of many factors in retaining church members and attendees according to Rainer in his book *High*

Expectation Churches. He wrote:

Although expository preaching was rated the highest single factor in our earlier study on evangelistic churches, we were surprised to discover that it was strongly correlated to closing the back door. Indeed in this study, expository preaching was second only to Sunday School among the methodologies that are effective in

⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁷ Ibid., 57.

assimilation.

We defined expository preaching as “primarily explanation or commentary on the biblical text; expounds the central idea of the text; often includes preaching through a book of the Bible.”⁸

Rainer goes on to explain that other types of preaching approaches that were stated in the study were topical, thematic and narrative preaching. He provides Exhibits 1-5 to demonstrate the supremacy of expository preaching over other styles of preaching. Studies show that even though pastors did not limit themselves to one style of preaching, as the standard they preached expository sermons more than 60 percent of the time. Rainer goes on to discuss how expository preaching becomes a method for assimilating members and how this type of preaching becomes a method for closing the back door. He explains:

Over and over again these pastors explained to us that Christians who are equipped to do the work of ministry are more likely to remain active in the church than other members. One of the most powerful types of equipping approaches is the teaching of God’s Word through contextual preaching. As the Bible is taught in its context week after week through expository preaching, the Holy Spirit teaches the people and convicts them about their service and places of ministry. This form of equipping is also able to reach the most people, since the worship service is typically the point of highest attendance.⁹

Thus, there is a link between assimilating new members and preaching. It is obvious that most people will be disciple and assimilated through the preaching ministry.

CHURCH HEALTH

The subject of church health is also connected to this project. Proper or

⁸Rainer, *High Expectations*, 16-17.

⁹Ibid.

improper preaching can affect the health of a church. The health of a particular church will affect growth, retention, evangelism, worship, etc. If a church is to be the kind of church that pleases God then health is necessary.

According to Rick Warren Church Health is of utmost importance:

Church health is the key to church growth. All living things grow *if* they're healthy. You don't have to *make* them grow – it's just natural for living organisms. As a parent, I didn't have to *force* my three children to grow. They naturally grew up. As long as I removed the hindrances, such as poor nutrition or an unsafe environment, their growth was automatic. If my children had not grown up, something would have been terribly wrong. I would have done whatever it took to discover the disease and correct it. I wouldn't have remained passive, spouting clichés about faithfulness, or wanting "quality not quantity" in my children. The same principle is true for the church. Since the church is a living organism, it's natural for it to grow if it's healthy. The church is a Body, not a business - an organism, not an organization. It's alive. If a church is not growing, it is dying. What then is the secret of church health? In a word, it's balance! Your body has nine different systems (circulatory, respiratory, digestive, skeletal, etc.). When these systems are all in balance, it produces health. But when your body gets out of balance, we call that "disease." Likewise when the Body of Christ becomes unbalanced, disease occurs. Health and growth can only occur when everything is brought into balance.¹⁰

Church health is not primarily about methods it is about principles. In his book that discusses the ten principles for growing a dynamic church, Bob Russell wrote:

I'm convinced that if your church is characterized by the ten principles outlined in this book, regardless of the methods you choose to implement them, God will bless your efforts.

Many church leaders go to conferences looking for a quick fix or easy solutions to their problems. They hope to discover some fresh program, some unique gimmick that will jump-start their church – contemporary music with a band, shorter or longer sermons, expository preaching or thematic preaching, small groups, or technological enhancements in the service. Discussing those ideas may be helpful, but what works in one culture or one area of the United States may not work in

¹⁰Rick Warren, "Church Growth is the Result of Church Health" available from <http://www.pastors.com/RWMT/?id=48&artid=1666&expand=1>; Internet; accessed 20 July 2006.

another. What one church adapts as positive change may be a source of division in another.¹¹

For a church and ministry to be healthy several principles need to be included. The issue is not methods but principles.

Russell goes on to communicate that the methods that Southeast Christian Church implemented may or may not work in other churches. He uses the analogy of David and Goliath, saying one can't fight the giant wearing Saul's armor. In other words one has to be him or herself while adapting to the culture one finds him or herself in.

Russell goes on to explain:

But the principles that undergird those methods – the ten principles discussed in this book – should be enlisted by every congregation that intends to glorify Jesus Christ. Although I will share with you some specific ways our church has tried to apply these principles, you must remember that the secret ingredients are the principles themselves, not the applications.¹²

One of the ten principles Russell discussed was Truth. His very first chapter is dedicated to this subject. The preacher must believe the truth. No one can rightly preach it if there is not a deep conviction that what he is saying is absolute truth. The preacher must not only believe the truth of God's Word, but he must also resist the temptation to compromise its truths. When one does overcome this temptation it is certain that opposition will follow. Bob Russell is convinced that preaching is very important to the health of the church.

Many people leave church feeling empty every week. They come hungry for the Word of God, but when they aren't fed, they go empty, hungry, and frustrated.

¹¹Bob Russell with Rusty Russell, *When God Builds a Church* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing Co., Inc.), 6.

¹²Ibid.

Eventually, unless all they want out of church is the security of tradition or an entertainment fix, they will drift away in an effort to find a place that's offering some substance.

I've noticed a disturbing trend among our churches and Christian colleges. We have discovered worship, and that is good, but some leaders are so enthusiastic about praise and worship that they want to omit the preaching altogether! A Bible-college professor recently told me that almost all of their student-led chapels, about four out of five, had no preaching at all. An "all-singing" service is certainly appropriate occasionally, but to rarely be exposed to preaching – especially on a campus that is supposed to be training the preachers of the next generation – seems way out of balance.

Jesus was a preacher. In fact, in Luke 4:43, Jesus said, "*I must preach the good news...because that is why I was sent*" (author's emphasis). John the Baptist was a preacher. Paul was a preacher. While Paul was in prison, he bemoaned the fact that some were preaching out of impure motives. Then he concluded, "But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice" (Phil. 1:18).¹³

It is obvious that preaching is necessary to church health. Not just preaching but the right kind of preaching.

EVANGELISM

There is a relationship between this project and evangelism. According to Thom Rainer, leaders in evangelistic churches believe that preaching is one of the most effective ways of reaching people for Christ.¹⁴

In his book *Effective Evangelistic Churches* he entitles chapter three, "The Pulpit is Still Primary." Rainer wrote:

In the plethora of church growth literature, rarely is the role of preaching analyzed or discussed. In some of his previous books, C. Peter Wagner asks for more research and discussion on the topic of preaching and church growth. The response to his plea has been minimal.

¹³Ibid., 24.

¹⁴Thom Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches: Successful Churches Reveal What Works and What Doesn't* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 14.

Few on our research team were surprised that preaching and church growth are related, particularly preaching and conversion growth. The surprise was in the intensity and quantity of the responses. *Among all the possible factors that led a church to evangelistic growth, preaching was clearly the most important element. Over 90 percent of the respondents indicated preaching was a major factor in their churches' evangelistic effectiveness.*

Of all the evangelistic methodologies described by these 576 churches, the topic of the pulpit and preaching required more follow-up than any other issue. We interviewed dozens of pastors, staff pastors, and laypersons to determine why preaching was deemed the single most important factor for evangelistic effectiveness.¹⁵

Rainer demonstrates a clear connection between preaching and evangelism. Preaching and evangelism are connected. The primacy of preaching is necessary.

Methodology

This project will be approached in a systematic way. First, the subject of preaching will be addressed. A variety of styles of preaching will be explored and definitions of each will be provided and discussed. Upon defining different approaches to preaching, the question of the best and most biblical form of preaching will be dealt with. Reasons will be provided for why a particular type of preaching is preferred. A response to those who would criticize biblical preaching and those who predict the future demise of preaching will also be attended to.

The second issue this project will speak to is, what is acceptable in worship (as it relates to preaching). In discussing what is acceptable in worship The Regulative Principle verses the Normative Principle will be discussed. These principles focus on what is and what is not acceptable in a corporate worship service. Where one comes down on the issue of the Regulative verses the Normative Principle will affect

¹⁵Ibid., 50.

how one preached and what is acceptable as it relates to preaching. The question of whether or not the preacher should use illustrations or how far he should go with the illustrations will be addressed. For example some might want to illustrate a sermon point with humor, dance or a prop. Would these things be acceptable or should they be forbidden is an important question.

Third, this project will examine the issue of declining churches. Research will show what a declining church looks like. The definition of a declining church will be expounded upon. There are several reasons a church declines and these reasons will be discussed. In light of those reasons, research will show what can be done to bring about a reversal. It is obvious that a declining church has certain needs and those needs will be discussed.

Fourth, the project will show what pastors who have led turn around churches have done, especially in relationship to preaching. This data comes about as a result of studies that have already taken place. This portion of the project will examine the type of preaching that has been effective in bringing about change and turnaround in churches that have experienced decline.

Fifth, the issue of scripture will be addressed in this project. There will be an explanation of scriptures that apply to declining churches. In light of the evidence of why churches decline and the needs of a declining church this study will show plausible scriptures a pastor could focus on while developing his preaching plan. This section will also provide suggestions for preaching. Topics, sermons, outlines, and Bible books to preach through will be provided as well.

Summary of Related Literature

The author has researched this subject thoroughly. While there are books, periodicals, journals and other writings that address various aspects of this project there are none that tie them together like this one. As far as the author knows, to tie the parts of each aspect of this project together and to come up with a preaching plan that will bless and benefit a preaching pastor that finds himself in a declining church, has never been done. To the best of the author's knowledge this project will offer something new to the field of preaching and the turning around of declining churches.

This author has found a few categories of books and other types of literature extremely helpful. Literature that focuses on the preparation and delivery of sermons are a great asset. Jerry Vines' *Power in the Pulpit* addresses the importance of expository preaching, while Hershael York's book on *Preaching with Bold Assurance* shows how to preach expository messages that are relevant and connect with people. Another category that is relevant is books that deal with church growth, church health and evangelism. Any book or piece of literature written by Thom Rainer, Rick Warren, and Bob Russell prove to be extremely helpful in addressing these issues. Also, the Bible as well as commentaries related to pertinent text are essential.

CHAPTER 2

THE IMPORTANCE OF PREACHING

Preaching Styles

There is an array of preaching styles. As one studies preaching literature, reads sermons, and listens to sermons by way of television, internet or in person, it is apparent that each communicator of God's Word has his own individual approach. Some authors are convinced there are more styles than another.

Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix suggest seven different sermon models. These models are topical, textual, narrative, biographical, dramatic monologue, theological, and ethical discourse. Vines and Shaddix suggest that each of these forms or models of preaching could all be expository sermons. They write, "Traditionally, sermons have been categorized according to various forms based upon certain qualities. Delineations of these forms frequently have included the expository sermon as another sermon model. Each of the following, however, could and should be subjected to the expositional process."¹⁶

Walter Liefeld recognizes three kinds of sermons. He states, "One is structurally expository, that is, its structure is determined by the structure of the biblical passage. A second type is indirectly expository. The sermon includes exposition, but the sermon structure is not determined solely by the passage. The third type is topical. Its

¹⁶Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons* (Chicago; Moody Press, 1999), 29-30.

structure is not determined by a passage, although it may be informed by one or more biblical passages.”¹⁷

John Broadus categorizes sermons from some what of a different angle. These types are subject-sermons, text-sermons, and expository sermons. He writes, “Subject-sermons are those in which the divisions are derived from the subject, independently of the text; while in the text-sermons, the divisions are taken from the text.”¹⁸ He goes on to state, “An expository discourse many be defined as one which is occupied mainly, or at any rate very largely, with the exposition of Scripture.”¹⁹

Biblical Model for Preaching

It is the conviction of the author that the best and most biblical form of preaching is expository preaching. Haddon Robinson defines expository preaching by writing, “Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preaching, then through him to his hearers.”²⁰ John Piper defines expository preaching by agreeing:

It is my contention that all true Christian preaching is expository preaching. Of course, if by an “expository” sermon is meant a verse-by-verse explanation of a

¹⁷Walter Liefeld, *New Testament Exposition: From Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 120.

¹⁸John Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1870), 306.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 322.

²⁰Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 19-20.

lengthy passage of Scripture, then indeed it is only one possible way of preaching, but this would be a misuse of the word. Properly speaking, “exposition” has a much broader meaning. It refers to the content of the sermon (biblical truth) rather than its style (a running commentary). To expound Scripture is to bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view. . . . The size of the text is immaterial, so long as it is biblical.²¹

According to the *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching* exposition is “. . . bringing out what is there. The word exposition derives from the Latin word *exposition*, which means ‘setting forth’ or ‘making accessible.’ The expository sermon is a sermon which faithfully brings a message out of scripture and makes that message accessible to contemporary hearers.”²²

Richard Mayhue provides a list of what he understands to be the minimal elements of an expository sermon. These elements are as follows:

1. The message finds its sole source in Scripture.
2. The message is extracted from Scripture through careful exegesis.
3. The message preparation correctly interprets Scripture in its normal sense and its context.
4. The message clearly explains the original God-intended meaning of Scripture.
5. The message applies the Scriptural meaning for today.²³

²¹John Piper, “Preaching as Worship: Meditations on Expository Preaching,” 6 [on-line]; accessed 23 March 2005; available from <http://www.beginningwithmoses.org/bigger/preacherpiper.htm>; Internet.

²²John S. McClure, “Expository Preaching,” in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, ed. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 130-131.

²³Richard L. Mayhue, “Rediscovering Expository Preaching,” in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching: Balancing the Science and Art of Biblical Exposition*, eds. Richard L. Mayhue and Robert L. Thomas (Dallas: Word, 1992), 12-13.

There is Old Testament evidence for such preaching. One example is found in the eighth chapter of Nehemiah. Jerry Vines writes:

I have always wondered why the eighth chapter of Nehemiah is so seldom used as an illustration of an effective Bible worship service. Virtually every ingredient of a worship service is present. Ezra, the scribe, stood upon a pulpit of wood with the book of the law of Moses in his hand. The people gathered themselves together in a spirit of unity and expectancy. Ezra proclaimed God's Word; the people responded with amens and prostrated themselves before the Lord in worship. What a magnificent worship passage! In verse 7 and 8 we are given the method the Levites used in teaching the people the law of God. Verse 8 says, "so they read from the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading."

Several terms from these verses help us understand Old Testament preaching. "Distinctly" is the Hebrew word *parash*, which means to distinguish or to specify clearly. The idea of clarity in making understanding possible is paramount. Further, the Levites "gave the sense." The Hebrew word is *sekel*, which means to give the sense of the meaning; perception or insight is indicated. Further, the verses say the Levites "caused them to understand the reading." The word for "caused them to understand" is *bin*, which means to separate mentally or to assist in understanding. That is a very good picture of what expository preaching is all about.²⁴

Vines goes on to list several other Old Testament accounts and words that lend themselves to that of an expositional form of preaching.²⁵

According to Vines the New Testament is also affirming of expository preaching. As the greatest preacher that ever lived, Jesus was a fan of the expository method. Luke 24:27 states, "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." The word translated expounded means, "to unfold the meaning of what is said." Vines states:

Two characteristics of expository preaching are seen in the method of our Lord. First, His method reveals a systematic presentation of Scripture. Beginning at

²⁴Jerry Vines, *A Practical Guide to Sermon Preparation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 11.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 10, 11.

Moses and in all the prophets He “explained through” the Scriptures. That certainly suggest the idea of consecutive preaching. What a marvelous exposition those two disciples must have heard as Jesus began at Genesis and moved consecutively through the Old Testament! The expository preacher has the same wonderful privilege.

Further, we observe that Jesus gave a Christ-centered presentation of Scripture. We are told that Jesus expounded in the Scriptures the things concerning and beat a path to Jesus; if there was no path, he said, he made one. True New Testament preaching must exalt the Lord Jesus. Some sermons I have heard would have been just as appropriate in a Jewish synagogue. No preaching can be called New Testament if the Lord Jesus Christ is not magnified.²⁶

O. S. Hawkins agrees with Jerry Vines, that Paul was an expository preacher. One example he gives is Acts 17:2 where Paul goes into the synagogue and reasons, as was his custom. Hawkins writes:

As Luke penned these words to describe the Apostle’s own practical approach to preaching, he chose the word *dialegomai* which we translate in our English Bible as “reasoned.” This compound word is made up of a preposition meaning “through” and a verb meaning “to speak.” Paul’s practical approach to the preaching event was to “speak through” the scripture. He was an expository preacher! Many preachers today reason with their hearers through popular psychology, current events and through such things as business motivational techniques. The preacher in the apostolic tradition is one who is expository, who “speaks through the scriptures” from the pulpit. After all, it is the word of God which brings conviction.²⁷

It appears that expository preaching is the safest and most effective form of preaching. It lays open what God’s Word is saying. If the preacher is to be credible he must communicate “Thus says the Lord.” Only God’s word can change lives, therefore the preacher of the Bible needs to use the scripture as his foundation. Thus, expository preaching is the safest, most effective, and biblical form of preaching. I concur with Jerry Vines when he wrote, “We are on solid biblical ground when we adopt

²⁶Ibid., 13.

²⁷O. S. Hawkins, *The Pastor’s Primer* (n.p., 2006), 33-34.

the expository method. The expository preacher is in the noble line of Nehemiah, Moses, the prophets, Paul and the apostles, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The preacher who determines in his heart to follow the expository method can have the confidence that God will bless him.”²⁸

Improper Verses Proper Expository Preaching

Some have a bad taste in their mouth when it comes to the subject of expository preaching. They feel that it is dry, boring and irrelevant. It is the author’s conviction that expository preaching is not that which produces dryness, boredom, and irrelevance, but it is some expository preachers that produce such results. Expository preaching does not mean making a few dull remarks as the preacher reads through a long passage of scripture. Neither is it an irrelevant history lesson that gives historical and theological truths without relevant life change. It is true that some so called sermons could be described as such, yet that is not what the author is advocating as expository sermons. Other unfortunate perceptions of expository sermons is that they provide too much detail or give information overload, while providing little to no form to the message. Vines and Shaddix address such unfortunate perceptions of expository preaching:

One of the facts of life is that people react against shoddy work. The majority of the criticisms raised against expository preaching are not justified with regard to the approach itself, but they are justified with regard to the approach poorly done. People do not disdain expository preaching; they disdain *poor* expository preaching. Some preachers have fallen prey to certain dangers in expository preaching and have, consequently, abused the approach. These abuses have caused expository preaching to fall into dispute along the way. Like the careful

²⁸Vines, *A Practical Guide*, 18.

driver on a well-traveled highway, the pastor will do well to avoid certain potholes along the road to exposition.²⁹

Vines own testimony of his journey to preaching expository is helpful at this point. He writes:

This book has been written largely from my own experience. My life and ministry were changed when I decided to devote myself to expository preaching. After a rough start and some failed attempts at exposition, my sermons generally became topical in nature during my first ten years of ministry. The Lord blessed my meager efforts. My churches had some growth. People came to Christ. Then I actually stumbled upon the method of expository preaching. At a Bible conference I had the opportunity to hear Dr. Warren Wiersbe teach the Word. Although I was a seminary graduate and had been preaching for several years, I had never heard anyone take the Bible and expound it as did Dr. Wiersbe. My approach to preaching completely changed. I determined to begin using the expository method. All I had to go by was Dr. Wiersbe's example. I had never studied the expository method. I was aware of no books on the subject, and I had heard very little preaching of that kind. I just had the conviction in my heart that exposition was the kind of preaching the Lord wanted me to do. So I started.

My efforts at the beginning were poor and tentative. As I went along, however, I began to notice a change in my ministry. The people started bring their Bibles; they showed more interest. I saw growth in the spiritual lives of my people. That convinced me of the value of expository preaching. The value to my own life is beyond my ability to place on the printed page. Only eternity will reveal what the expository method of preaching has done for me. The value in the lives of the people who have heard me preach will await the evaluation of the judgment seat of Christ. But there is little doubt in my mind that the people themselves have been blessed through the preaching of expository sermons.³⁰

Hershael York recounts his encounter with one who criticized expository preaching. He writes:

When I first came to The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as a preaching professor, the seminary administration issued a press release and made much of the fact that I was committed to an expository model of preaching. Within weeks I received a letter from a man who criticized exposition by saying that it "does not lend itself to illustrations, and is usually an expounding of the Word without any relation to life; it becomes dry, even boring, without the windows of illustrations that complement and undergird the good news. Expository preaching does not

²⁹Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 37.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 33.

challenge the mind or the emotions, is essentially simplistic, teaching very little of the larger, cosmic sweep of the gospel to all of life.”

When I responded to his letter, I wrote, “Your objections are not to expository preaching at all. You object to *bad* preaching. If one of my students preached a sermon such as you describe, he simply would not pass my class.” I went on to describe what exposition really is and how it can be done well. To his credit, he wrote back and apologized and admitted that he had only heard expository preaching criticized. Furthermore, he had the unfortunate experience of hearing a person preach poorly and then claim that he was an expositor.

Expository preaching does indeed explain the text, but it also must answer the great epistemological question: so *what?* When a man of God stands in the pulpit and proclaims the Word with passion, conviction, and emotion, his audience will truly hear the content of the message. Only when they actually hear it can they act on it. Making that emotional connection with the message forces a decision: will I accept and apply the truth of this text, or reject and refuse it?³¹

York asserts that expository preaching is not the long running commentary that some suggest. He writes:

Expository preaching is defined not by a style nor by a particular methodology, but by the end result of explaining and applying the meaning of the text. *Expository preaching is any kind of preaching that shows people the meaning of a biblical text and leads them to apply it to their lives.* Contrary to some popular notions of expository preaching, that does not necessarily mean working through a passage verse-by-verse. A one-sermon overview of a book can be expository, provided it teaches the authors intent and purpose in writing the book and the impact it should make on our lives. By the same token, one might do an expository series, spending months in a book of the Bible, carefully digesting each verse and its significance.

Furthermore, an expository sermon could take on many forms. One might do a sermon on the parable of the lost sheep in the dramatic persona of the shepherd. In the same chapter, one could preach on the story of the prodigal son from the point of view of the older brother (who is, after all, the real point of that parable!). So long as the author’s intended meaning, purpose and application are maintained, the precise form of the sermon is a function of the preacher’s personality and expectations of the culture.³²

³¹Hershael W. York and Bert Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance: A Solid and Enduring Approach to Engaging Exposition* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 7.

³²*Ibid.*, 34.

While Hershael York believes that the preacher needs to explain the text he also believes that the preacher is obligated to illustrate and apply it as well. He suggest that preachers replace sermons with descriptive outlines with sermons that have outlines that are imperative in nature. From York's perspective, if the sermon is not applicable it is not preaching. The sermon should answer the question, "So What?" York writes about the importance of application not only in the sermon body but also in the sermon points:

Obviously, many preachers do not feel the need to make their points applicational. They opt for outlines that are little more than the descriptive outlines we have already talked about in chapter 5. They may dress them up a bit, alliterating them or rhyming them. But no matter how many times you say, "The Problem, The Process, The Promise" or "The Cause, The Condition, The Conclusion," all you do is point out the structure of the passage and perhaps its meaning in its original context. You still fail to build a bridge to your listeners. You are preaching a sermon that even the devil can agree with. He can be in complete agreement with your analysis of the text. The most backslidden member of your church can nod in sympathy with your description of the new covenant—or of any other biblical truth. Applicational points in which you show the mandate of the text and its claim on our lives awaken people to their own need for conformity to the image of Christ. When you preach applicational points, the devil can't agree and the backslidden (or lost) can't stay comfortable.³³

Preaching is much more than content. How one preaches the message can have a lot to do with the message's effectiveness. Hershael York is convinced that in order for a sermon to get to peoples heads it must go through their hearts. Communication involves the verbal, vocal and visual. The verbal deals with what is said. The vocal addresses how it is said and the visual speaks of how one looks while saying it. It is important to realize how much impact each of these elements of communication has. These elements make the preacher's message believable. People judge whether or not the

³³Ibid., 142.

preacher's message is believable based on these three criteria. Seven percent of the preacher's credibility is verbal or based on what the preacher says. Thirty-eight percent is vocal or based on how he says it, while fifty-five percent is visual or based on how the preacher looks when he says it.³⁴

It is this author's conviction that those who criticize expository preaching are criticizing poor expository preaching. Expository preaching can be and should be relevant, illustrative, applicable and engaging. The author has found the following outlining process to be helpful for making the expository sermon engaging. Let us begin with the introduction. Introduce the sermon with the now, the then and the always. The now is a reference to beginning the sermon with a story, analogy, reference or illustration that will meet the hearer where he or she is in life. Instead of beginning in ancient day Jerusalem, begin in the twenty-first century where the people are so as to gain their attention. Move from the now to the then. The then is a reference to the text of scripture and its context. This involves reading the scripture and setting the biblical context for the passage. This moves us to the always. The always is the timeless truth of the text that is the thesis statement for the sermon.

Once the preacher finishes the introduction he will move to the main points of the sermon. The main points can be broken down into three parts. These three parts are the explanation, illustration and application. When possible the points themselves should be applicable instead of descriptive. The preacher will want to conclude the message similar to the way he began. He will want to restate the thesis statement or the timeless truth. He also will find it helpful to close in the now. In other

³⁴Ibid., 201-203.

words he will want to wrap things up with a story, analogy, reference or illustration that will meet the hearer where he or she is in life.

The Benefit of Expository Preaching

There are several advantages of preaching expository sermons. When expository preaching is done well it will have beneficial results. When done well there are no disadvantages to this type of preaching. Jerry Vines writes of how there are benefits to both the preacher as well as the people who hear the sermons. The advantages to the preacher are as follows:

1. It makes it possible for the preacher to learn the word.
2. It keeps the preacher out of a rut.
3. It guards against using the Bible as a club.
4. It allows the Word of God to speak to current situations.
5. It enables us to deal with passages that might otherwise have been overlooked or even intentionally avoided.
6. It makes the preacher work.
7. It removes anxiety about what to preach.
8. It gives confidence to the preacher.³⁵

The advantages of expository preaching to the people are as follows:

1. It gives people strength.
2. It encourages people to become students of the Word themselves.
3. It broadens people's horizons.
4. It provides the preacher with an increasingly maturing congregation.³⁶

³⁵Vines, *A Practical Guide to Sermon Preparation*, 20-22.

Expository preaching is the most helpful kind of preaching for the preacher as well and the hearer. It exalts Jesus, evangelizes sinners and equips and matures the child of God. This form of preaching is the most biblical form of preaching and produces more lasting fruit than any other kind.

Response to Preaching Critics

Some prognosticators have a bleak view of preaching for the 21st century. They see expository preaching as a dinosaur or sorts. It is a relic or fossil that has little to no relevance in this modern day. A number are convinced that this kind of preaching is not a viable means by which one can effectively deliver God's message. Calvin Miller says that three points and a poem will not reach the person in the pew any longer. While at a speaking appointment in New Braunfels, Texas, first reported by the *Texas Baptist Standard*, Miller said, "Narrative preaching is the key to reaching many people. . . . Story telling scratches an itch everyone has."³⁷ Miller comments on the traditional three point sermon, "It's easier to jam three points into the text rather than saying what the passage itself is really saying. Besides, people can't remember three things, and you can't preach on three things with equal intensity, so why not pick one."³⁸ The article goes on and states, "One of the most important things a sermon must do is hold the congregation's attention, he said. Miller suggests using visual aids-and it doesn't hurt to keep things hidden for a bit. 'Boxes and bags are great,' he said. 'No matter how boring you are,

³⁶Ibid., 22-24.

³⁷George Henson, "Author Advocates New Model for Preaching Sermons," *Western Recorder*, 11 January 2005, p. 12.

³⁸Ibid.

you are going to hold their attention—at least until you open the bag.”³⁹ Even though Miller does not blatantly tear down expository preaching, he does assert that narrative preaching is the most effective way to communicate.

An account by Craig Bird repeats this attitude. Bird speaks on the movement of devaluing the sermon in worship. He quotes Chris Seay, pastor of Ecclesia and one of the leaders of the postmodern church culture, “I don’t think we will have master orators much longer. . . . Art, dance, and music are new forces that will play increasingly larger roles’ if the church is to be relevant to the Millennials, today’s teens and young adults.”⁴⁰ Seay continues, “If the emergent-church model is accepted, preaching will shift from the linear style to the storyteller-like Jesus, who spoke in parables.”⁴¹ Citing Julie Pennington-Russell, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, Bird demonstrates the logic behind the move away from biblical exposition. She remarks, “I think of it [preaching] as all of us going into a cave together and sharing what we’ve discovered with our pickaxes. It’s not like you tie a Scripture to a chair and beat it with a rubber hose for 20 minutes to see what you can get out of it.”⁴²

In all reality the conclusions of Miller, Seay, and Pennington-Russell is deficient of substance. Blinded by a bias for storytelling, they fail to see the advantage of expository preaching in communicating to and being pertinent with any and all age brackets. It could be that they are addressing deficient expository sermons that contain

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Craig Bird, “Preaching in the 21st Century,” *Western Recorder*, 2 November 2004, p. 1.

⁴¹Ibid. p. 4.

⁴²Ibid.

too much substance, giving hearers information overload, without relevant illustrations and contemporary application.

Dr. Albert Mohler's conviction about preaching is completely antithetical to the above positions. At the 2005 *Power in the Pulpit* conference held at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Mohler said, "Churches need a preaching reformation that will restore expository sermons to their rightful place at the heart of Christian worship. . . Reformation is not going to happen in our churches until it shows up in the pulpit . . . and it's not going to happen until preaching is again paramount in the worship life of the community of faith."⁴³

On another occasion Dr. Mohler wrote of his optimism regarding the future of expository preaching as well as his pessimism in relationship to preaching's future. He used a play off of Charles Dickens introduction of his great novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. Regarding today's state of preaching Dr. Mohler believes, "'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity. . .'"⁴⁴ Mohler writes:

On the one hand, there are signs of great promise and encouragement. On the other hand, several ominous trends point toward dangerous directions for preaching in the future.

⁴³David Roach, "Mohler: Recovery of Preaching will Show 'Power of God,'" *Baptist Press*; accessed 31 March 2005. available from <http://www.bpnews.asp?Id=20491>; Internet.

⁴⁴Albert Mohler, "The State of Preaching Today," accessed 28 August 2006, available from http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2006-08-28; Internet.

In surveying the current state of preaching, my primary concern is for preaching in the evangelical churches of North America. In these circles, preaching is generally considered to be an important part of worship and church life. Furthermore, it is generally understood to be the chief means of instructing the congregation in the Word of God and in presenting the claims of Christ. Even so, there appears to be little consensus about what preaching is to be in terms of shape, structure, substance, and subject matter. This confusion is readily seen when attending conferences on preaching or in listening to preachers talk about their own understanding of the task.⁴⁵

Hershael York believes that preaching is alive and well in the 21st century.

Preaching has always been and still remains God's number one way of communicating God's Word. York states:

Since effectiveness in communicating God's Word is our goal, we can find no greater means of sharing the truth than through the medium of preaching. While many have challenged preaching's usefulness and branded it as outdated and ineffective, preaching still remains God's primary means of ministering the Scriptures to his people. Oral communication is the most personal and powerful way to connect with others.⁴⁶

It is the conviction of this author that expository preaching is not out dated and is very much relevant in the 21st Century. It is not only a viable way of communicating God's Word, but it is the best way to communicate God's Word.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶York and Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance*, 5.

CHAPTER 3

ACCEPTABLE FOR WORSHIP

If one is to discuss the subject of preaching as it relates to revitalizing a declining church it is imperative to discuss the issue of the worship service. There are a plethora of styles and types of worship services. These styles are given a host of names that are sometimes clear and are sometimes ambiguous. There are traditional services, blended services, contemporary services, seeker sensitive services, free spirited services, emerging church services and the list goes on and on. For our purposes, the idea of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in the worship service is necessary.

Regulative Verses the Normative Principle

In discussing what is and what is not acceptable in a worship service it is important to address the subject of the regulative principle and the normative principle. The regulative principle of worship is a 20th century word used for a historical Calvinist belief on the order of public worship. This belief comes from what is believed the Bible and the second commandment teaches about the order of worship. The essence of the principal regarding worship is that only those rudiments that are established or appointed by command or example in the Bible are acceptable in worship, or in other words, that God institutes in the Bible everything he requires for worship in the Church and that

everything else is forbidden.⁴⁷

The regulative principle has often competed with the normative principle of worship which teaches that whatever is not forbidden in Scripture is allowable in worship, as long as it is pleasing to the peace and accord of the Church. In short, there must be conformity with the general practice of the Church and no ban in the Bible for whatever is done in worship.

The normative principle of worship is the customary approach to worship practiced by the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, and Methodists. The regulative principle of worship is generally practiced by the conservative Reformed churches, Restoration Movement, and in other conservative Protestant denominations, and it finds expression in confessional documents such as the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Belgic Confession, and the London Baptist Confession of Faith.⁴⁸ The normative principle was crystallized by an Anglican minister named Richard Hooker. He contended, along with Martin Luther before him, that as long as a practice is not Biblically prohibited, a congregation is at liberty to employ it to order its corporate life and worship.⁴⁹

Some extreme advocates of the regulative principle even disallow for the use of musical instruments in worship. They deem there is no instance of the use of musical devices for worship in the New Testament and the Old Testament uses of

⁴⁷“Regulative principle of worship” *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, [on-line]; accessed 6 February 2007; available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regulative_principle_of_worship; Internet.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹D. A. Carson, *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 25, 54-55.

instruments in worship were particularly tied to the ceremonial laws of the Temple in Jerusalem (like the Old Testament sacrificial system) and are not valid in the church.⁵⁰ In the same way, some have applied the regulative principle to argue for singing only from the Book of Psalms and rules out any hymns or other non-Biblical songs. Many early Calvinists had nothing to do with musical instruments and advocated using the Bible alone for singing during worship services, and this practice characterized Presbyterians and other Reformed and Calvinist churches for some time. Since the 1800's most of these groups have modified their definition of the regulative principle and are now using hymns and things of that nature.⁵¹

There is a new concept that has been recently presented into this discourse that attempts to bring a balance amid the regulative and normative principles. It is sometimes referred to as the "informed principle of worship." It teaches that: "What is commanded in Scripture regarding worship, it is required. What is prohibited in Scripture regarding worship, it is forbidden. What is not prohibited in Scripture regarding worship, it is permissible in worship only if properly deduced from proper application of Scripture using good and necessary consequence."⁵²

⁵⁰Brian Schwertley, "Musical Instruments in the Public Worship of God," ed. Stephen Pribble, [on-line]; accessed 6 February 2007; available from <http://www.reformed.com/pub/music.htm>; Internet.

⁵¹"Regulative principle of worship," *Wikipedia*.

⁵²"Normative principle of worship," *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, [on-line]; accessed 6 February 2007; available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regulative_principle_of_worship; Internet.

Don Whitney who is presently a professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville is an advocate of the regulative principle.⁵³ The following comes from an article from Baptist Press:

God has not left Christians to worship Him in any manner they please, but has given instructions in Scripture how He is to be worshiped, author and professor Don Whitney said during a lecture series at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

While most Christians know when they are worshiping in spirit, many are John 4:24 to worship Him in truth, Whitney said.

Whitney is associate professor of spiritual formation at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo., and author of a number books, including "Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life."

The Bible, he noted, provides the "truth" aspect of the double command. Scripture sets forth the elements that are to be included in worship and nothing should be added to them, he said.

This biblical mandate is known as the "regulative principle of worship" and if it were faithfully followed by churches Whitney said many of the in the so-called "worship wars" would be avoided.

The regulative principle may be summarized in a twofold question Whitney said every congregation should ask when considering the addition of an element to corporate worship: Is it God-centered and biblical?

"The regulative principle of worship in essence says that God knows how He wants to be worshiped better than we do," Whitney said.

"He has not left us in the dark about that and has revealed in Scripture how he wants us to worship Him, what the elements of worship are to be. If He has done so, then those are the things we must do and we should not bring any of our own ideas in addition to that."

⁵³ On the Regulative Principle, see Philip Ryken, Derek Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III, eds., *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), 17-73. For a historical introduction, see Iain Murray, *The Reformation of the Church: A Collection of Reformed and Puritan Documents on Church Issues* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1965), 35-58.

Biblical elements of corporate worship include preaching and teaching the Word of God, prayer, the public reading of Scripture, the singing of Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, and celebrating the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The regulative principle rules out extra-biblical elements such as drama, clowns and the like, Whitney said.

Whitney pointed out that many Baptists today practice what is known as the "normative principle" of worship. The normative principle says that corporate worship must include all biblical elements, but believers also are free to include things not forbidden by Scripture.

This approach is dangerous because God's will is known only through His special revelation, Whitney said.

"We don't know what honors God except that which He has revealed," he said. "In areas like worship where He has revealed His truth, we may not go beyond the bounds of that.

"There are other areas of [church] life [in which] He has not revealed the activities or elements. So we don't say the Bible tells us the elements of a good church nursery, for example. For those things, we have general principles to apply."⁵⁴

D. A. Carson comments on the regulative, normative principle by saying, "Theologically rich and serious services from both camps often have more common content than either side usually acknowledges."⁵⁵ Carson goes on to say that, "there is no single passage in the NT that establishes a paradigm for corporate worship."⁵⁶ In response to Carson's assertion that the New Testament has no paradigm for corporate worship, Mark Dever agrees but gives his disclaimer. Dever stated:

Agreed. Yet in leading God's people in corporate worship, we are in some sense binding their consciences to participate in each part of the service. That binding

⁵⁴Jeff Robinson, "Whitney: Worship should be God-centered & biblical" (Baptist Press, Nov. 11, 2003) [on-line]; accessed 6 February 2007; available from <http://www.baptistpress.org/bpnews.asp?ID=17059>; Internet.

⁵⁵Carson, *Worship by the Book*, 55.

⁵⁶Ibid.

is only legitimate insofar as it has positive scriptural warrant, because Scripture alone is worthy to bind the conscience and function as the final rule for faith and practice. Not surprisingly, Scripture is replete with examples of God caring deeply about the “how’s” of our corporate worship.⁵⁷

Those who hold to the regulative principle put forth an effort to convince others that their view is Biblical. Their argument is related to the idea that worship is related to redemption. There are several scriptures, especially in Exodus 3-10, that certainly imply that the purpose of corporate worship is redemption. If that be the case it only makes sense that God would reveal to his people how he wants them to worship when they gather together. God would not be careless to leave the outworking of His purpose to the imagination of those who have a tendency be idolatrous. In Exodus 32 Moses picked the time and place to worship. At Sinai God gave the people of Israel stipulations and procedures for worship. Mark Dever writes, “Corporate worship is too central to God’s purpose in redemption for Him to leave the specifics of it to the likes of us.”⁵⁸

There are several Old Testament texts that are given as an attempt to prove that the regulative principle is Biblical. One of those scriptures is the second commandment found in Exodus 20:4. It states, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness *of anything* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth;” God is forbidding certain forms of worship. This command shows that God cares how his people worship.

⁵⁷Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 77-78.

⁵⁸Ibid, 78.

Another text is Exodus 32:1-10 where Israel made the golden calf. The scripture says:

Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

And Aaron said to them, "Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf.

Then they said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!"

So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD." Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.

And the LORD said to Moses, "Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!'" And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people! Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation."

The people were attempting to worship God in another way and the LORD responds wrathful. This example illustrates how serious God takes Himself and His worship. God's people are to worship Him on His terms.

There are other Old Testament accounts that are used to endorse the regulative principle. One is Leviticus 10:1-3, where God kills Nadab and Abihu for bringing "profane fire" before Him.

Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; And before all the people I must be glorified.'" So Aaron held his peace.

Another one is found In 1Chronicals 13:7-11 where God kills Uzzah for touching the ark to keep it from falling.

So they carried the ark of God on a new cart from the house of Abinadab, and Uzza and Ahio drove the cart. Then David and all Israel played music before God with all their might, with singing, on harps, on stringed instruments, on tambourines, on cymbals, and with trumpets.

And when they came to Chidon's threshing floor, Uzza put out his hand to hold the ark, for the oxen stumbled. Then the anger of the LORD was aroused against Uzza, and He struck him because he put his hand to the ark; and he died there before God. And David became angry because of the LORD's outbreak against Uzza; therefore that place is called Perez Uzza to this day.

The advocates of the regulative principle also use various New Testament passages to establish their position. One text that is used is where Jesus tells the Samaritan woman about worship.

The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship."

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

According to this scripture, proper worship is a response to whom God has revealed himself to be. It is not enough to be sincere in worship, worship must be regulated by scripture.

Another New Testament passage that is used to support the regulative principle is 1 Corinthians 14. In regards to this chapter Mark Dever writes:

In the instruction on corporate worship, Paul encourages prophecy over speaking in tongues (vv.1-5). But if tongues are spoken, "two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said" (v.29, NIV). Yet how else could they weigh what is said in the assembly but by the scale of Scripture? Paul goes on to reason that "God is not a God of confusion, but of peace" (v.33). God's revealed character has governing implications for how we

worship Him. What is even more striking is that Paul himself, by apostolic authority vested in him by the Spirit, is regulating how many prophets can prophesy at one time by the same Spirit! In other words, the apostolic revelation given to Paul by the Spirit is regulating how even Spirit-inspired charismatic gifts are exercised in the corporate assembly. Corporate worship—even charismatic worship—is regulated by revelation.⁵⁹

Jeff Robinson addresses what Don Whitney believes about the regulative principle of worship. He writes:

Whitney argued that all of Scripture is to be brought to bear on worship because all Scripture is inspired by God. However, there is an acknowledged priority of authority in Scripture among evangelicals toward the New Testament. A New Testament command on worship, such as that found in John 4:24, is the highest authority on worship, he said.

While a single verse does not teach the regulative principle, numerous passages from across Scripture, when considered together, make a strong case for it, he said. These include:

-- The first four commandments found in Exodus 20:3-4, 7-8. All deal largely with worship.

-- The details given by God in the construction of the furniture and garments of worship in Exodus 25-30. In Exodus 30:33,38, God promises the death penalty for the misuse of anointing oil and incense.

-- The death of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10:1-3. God struck them dead for offering "strange fire" to the Lord.

-- The disobedience of Saul in offering the sacrifices Samuel was to have offered in 1 Samuel 10:8 and 13:8-13.

-- The death of Uzzah for touching the Ark of the Covenant in 2 Samuel 6:3-8. Whitney pointed out that Uzzah's motive can be assumed to be pure in keeping the Ark from falling off a cart, but God struck him down for his irreverence. This overturns the argument of some contemporary worship leaders who say only a worshiper's attitude, and not how he worships, matters to God, Whitney said, noting that God must be worshiped equally in spirit and truth.

-- The leprosy of King Uzziah for offering incense in 2 Chronicles 26:18-21. Only priests were allowed to offer incense by divine fiat.

⁵⁹Ibid, 79.

-- The sin of King Ahaz for replacing the altar of worship in 2 Kings 16:10-16.

-- Jesus' rejection of the Pharisees' worship in Mark 7:6-7. Christ said they worshiped in vain because their doctrines of worship were the precepts of men.

-- The warning of the Israelites in Deuteronomy 12:30-32 not to get their ideas of worship from the world around them, but only from God's revelation.

The regulative principle is not a stifling "cookie-cutter" approach to worship, Whitney said. It merely regulates the elements used in worship and demands that God be worshiped in a manner consistent with Hebrews 12:28: "in reverence and awe." There is freedom in how the elements can be applied, he said.⁶⁰

It is the conviction of this author that the regulative principle of worship has little to no biblical support. The implications of the above scriptures are stretched at best and read into at worst. It is important for the interpreter of scripture to ask, "What was the original intent of the text?"

As one looks at the second commandment one will find that the issue is not simply how one worships God. The issue is how one views and pictures God as one worships. The problem with making images spoke more to how one displayed God than how one worshiped Him. Making images would create ideas about God that were not true, which in essence would lead to idolatry.

The golden calf passage, in Exodus 32, is closely connected to the second commandment which involves making images. For one to use this passage to communicate that this passage shows that God takes Himself and His worship serious, therefore the regulative principle is the way to go, implies that those who hold to another

⁶⁰Robinson, "Whitney: Worship should be God-centered & biblical."

position does not take God or His worship serious. This is not the case. There are many who do not hold to the regulative principle that take God serious.

As far as the passages that deal with God killing Nadab and Abihu for bringing “profane fire” before the LORD, and Uzza touching the ark, they are not text that teach the regulative principle. These are accounts that teach the importance of being obedient as a worshiper of God. We are certainly not to worship God in ways that he forbids. Obedience is absolutely necessary in order to worship God.

The John 14 passage that deals with Jesus and the woman at the well does not prove the validity of the regulative principle either. It is true that one is to worship the God scripture has revealed God to be. It is also true that this text reveals that worship is to be regulated by scripture, yet the one who is an advocate of the normative principle would affirm the same thing.

According to Mark Dever’s quote, 1 Corinthians 14 implies that God’s character and Word has governing implications for how we worship him. While this may be true, there are those who do not embrace the regulative principle who strongly agree with Dever’s assertion. Bible believers on both sides of the issue would affirm that worship is regulated by revelation.

As a result of careful research and a lack of Biblical evidence this author does not hold to the regulative principle. It is opinion of this author that those who hold to a strict regulative principle will many times find themselves being inconsistent. How far one will go with this principle is an important question. While most will not say it is wrong to use modern conveniences in worship, like sound equipment and air

conditioners, it is difficult to know where to draw the line for advocates of the regulative principle.

It may be that D. A. Carson was right when he stated that there may not be much difference in how those who hold to the regulative principle and how those who hold to the normative principle live out worship. As stated before, Carson writes, “theologically rich and serious services from both camps often have more common content than either side usually acknowledges.”⁶¹ Don Whitney states:

The regulative principle is not a stifling "cookie-cutter" approach to worship, Whitney said. It merely regulates the elements used in worship and demands that God be worshiped in a manner consistent with Hebrews 12:28: "in reverence and awe." There is freedom in how the elements can be applied, he said.

"We are to worship in ways that edify our local church," Whitney said. "That is a New Testament command on worship. Worship in a black church does not have to be the same as in a white church. Worship in an inner-city church does not have to look like worship in a suburban church."⁶²

This author does not adhere to the regulative principle. Either the normative principle or the new, informed principle of worship is to be preferred. Once again, the informed principle of worship states, “What is commanded in Scripture regarding worship, it is required. What is prohibited in Scripture regarding worship, it is forbidden. What is not prohibited in Scripture regarding worship, it is permissible in worship only if properly deduced from proper application of Scripture using good and necessary consequence.”⁶³

⁶¹Carson, *Worship by the Book*, 55.

⁶²Robinson, “Whitney: Worship should be God-centered & biblical.”

⁶³“Normative principle of worship,” *Wikipedia*.

How the Regulative Verses the Normative Principle Relates to Preaching

Since preaching is the central activity of the worship service, it is obvious that the regulative and normative principles relate to preaching. Some suggest that there are five elements of corporate worship and one should not go beyond these elements. All of these elements revolve around the word of God. They include, reading the Word, preaching the Word, praying the Word, singing the Word, and seeing the Word (in the ordinances).⁶⁴ Mark Dever defiantly believes that preaching the Bible is an essential element in a corporate worship service. He writes:

“Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim. 4:2). Pastors are commanded by God to preach Scripture regularly. The preaching of God’s Word is God’s ordained method for communication the Gospel to sinners (Rom. 10:14-17; cf. Acts 8:4). Pastoring is ultimately about ensuring salvation for ourselves and others (1Tim. 4:13-16). But we cannot do that work without devoting ourselves to preaching and teaching. This is true because the Gospel is what ensures salvation (Rom. 1:16). Cease preaching *that* Gospel, and you will compromise your responsibility in ensuring the salvation of the souls God has entrusted to you.

This is why a regular diet of specifically evangelistic expository preaching is crucial. We don’t *just* need to preach a salvation message each week – people need meat, not just milk (Heb. 5:11-14). Nor do we need to present only the point of a passage each week, isolated from its Gospel moorings (1 Cor. 2:1-5). Our churches need a consistent diet of sermons that present the Gospel and its implications as the natural out-working of making the point of a biblical passage the point of each individual sermon. Jesus said that all Scripture is ultimately about Him (Luke 24:27, 45-47). He has given us both the permission and the mandate to read the whole Bible with Gospel-colored glasses – and then to preach the Gospel as we preach the point of the passage, addressing both believers and unbelievers with its truth, power, and implications.⁶⁵

⁶⁴Philip Ryken, Derek Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III, eds., *Give Praise to God: a Vision for Reforming Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), 65.

⁶⁵ Dever and Alexander, *The Deliberate Church*, 79.

How the word is preached and supported is important. Many reformed preachers that hold to the regulative principle would assert that nothing needs to support the word, such as drama, props, or videos. As stated earlier Don Whitney said, “Biblical elements of corporate worship include preaching and teaching the Word of God, prayer, the public reading of Scripture, the singing of Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, and celebrating the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The regulative principle rules out extra-biblical elements such as drama, clowns and the like.”⁶⁶ In light of this, the position one takes on the regulative or normative principle could have major implications on one's preaching and with what resources one uses when one preaches.

How Far to Go With Illustrations

When it comes to using illustrations in sermons, this author had a seminary professor tell him, “When in doubt, throw it out!” That is to say, if there are any doubts about using a particular illustration then the preacher should refrain from using it. Some people who are advocates of the regulative principle go so far as to condemn illustrations of any sort. Hershael York tells of a personal experience with one who has such a view:

Several years ago I had a student in my preaching class who was very resistant to my approach to preaching. Like many others, he was convinced that it was the preacher's job just to preach the biblical facts and let the Holy Spirit do the rest. We talked over lunch one day as he respectfully told me of his disagreement. He shared with me that he had already been a pastor for fourteen years and that he was convinced that if people only know the content of the Bible well enough, they would act on it in ways revealed to them by the Spirit.

I nodded to let him know I was hearing him, and then I went through my regular list of questions designed to challenge his thinking, “Why does the Holy

⁶⁶Robinson, “Whitney: Worship should be God-centered & biblical.”

Spirit need you to explain the text if he doesn't need you to apply it? Couldn't he illumine their minds without you? And what if you have someone in your church smarter than you; do they really need you? Can't they just figure out the content for themselves?" But then I asked him the one question that goes beyond theory: "How is your approach working? Are your people accurately and adequately applying the Scripture to their lives? Do you see them growing in their conformity to Christ?"

My question was met by stunned silence, and then he quickly went back to his objections. We finished our lunch, and I really didn't think much more about it until later in the semester when he asked to speak to me once more. This time his attitude was completely different.

For months this young pastor had preached his heart out about evangelism. He had preached nearly every passage in the Bible that demonstrated the need for evangelism, the way God blesses it, and how the Holy Spirit uses it. He was convinced that he had done everything he could to teach his people about the necessity of sharing the gospel with others. Then, following his series of sermons on evangelism, at the very next business meeting of the church, he introduced a program to train members how to share their faith. Feeling that they would be ready to act on what they had learned, he asked the church to vote to approve and implement the program. He was stunned when the very people who had sat through his exhaustive series on evangelism voted down his initiative.

Their failure to act on his preaching shook the young man to the core of his beliefs about preaching. Confident that he had truly shown them the biblical mandate, he was hurt and bewildered when they rejected it. So he told me, "I said, 'I'm going to try this York's way.' And from that point on I began to focus not only on content but on applications. In every sermon I would preach the truth of the text and then confront them with a decision whether or not they would obey the command or the implications of the text."

With a smile of delight on his face, he then related to me how the very first time he did it, the response was amazing. "People began to compliment my preaching and to ask me what had gotten into me. What's more, we began to see real response in the invitation and in their lives during the week. Wives called me to tell me that their husbands were changing. Deacons began to serve in more helpful ways. It was amazing, and it was immediate. Then I had to admit that the reason they had never done anything was that I never told them to do anything with the authority of Scripture. I would preach doctrine but never relate it to life. I would tell them what Paul did, but I never told them that meant they had to do it too."⁶⁷

Illustrations are an important element to sermons. Ramesh Richard writes,

⁶⁷York and Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance*, 13-14.

“The impact of the sermon is always connected to the illustrations in it . . . Why? Because stories, or illustrations, comply with the most basic principle of communication. They take the listener from the known to the unknown.”⁶⁸ Haddon Robinson agrees, “Well-chosen, skillfully used illustrations can do just about everything—restate, explain, validate, or apply ideas by relating them to tangible experiences.”⁶⁹

Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix provide suggestions of where one might find good sources for illustrations. They suggest avoiding the use of illustration books because they are “canned and outdated.”⁷⁰ The best sources are the Bible, current events, personal experiences, personal reading, nature, language, internet and email, and sermons.⁷¹ Stephen Olford offers this added concern, “If the illustration is found, make sure it is credible. Be accurate in the retelling of an illustration, give credit succinctly as appropriate in the context of the message, and make sure that the point is clear. If you have to illustrate your illustration, then you may have the wrong one!”⁷²

There are a variety of kinds of illustrations that a preacher can use, but this author's favorite is personal illustrations. Some of those who hold to the regulative seem to discourage personal illustrations. Mark Dever writes:

Let the content of the Gospel do the work. This doesn't mean you have to be intentionally boring. But it does mean you have to be intentionally self-

⁶⁸Ramesh Richard, *Scripture Sculpture: A Do-It-Yourself Manual for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 125.

⁶⁹Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 2nd ed., 152.

⁷⁰Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 193.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 193-95.

⁷²Stephen F. Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 167.

effacing. Illustrations from personal experience are often subtly self-serving. People love them because they tell them about you; but this is precisely what the true Gospel minister wants to be careful about in the pulpit—not because he doesn't want to be “authentic,” but because such illustrations usually attract more attention to ourselves than to the Gospel. So use them sparingly, if at all, especially in the early years of your ministry, when we are all more prone to hubris of youth and the pride of popularity.⁷³

The irony of such a statement comes as a result of what Dever says a few pages latter.

He states, “We are simply less likely to trust people until we have had an opportunity to know them, especially when choosing our leader. We want to know them, their personalities, their motives, their goals, their struggles . . . the list could go on.”⁷⁴ Dever continues, “Be knowable. The biggest mistakes pastors make is thinking that a false demand for ‘professional distance’ precludes us from friends in the church.”⁷⁵ It seems reasonable to this author that one of the most effective ways to become knowable is to use personal illustration in the pulpit.

Hershael York strongly disagrees with Dever about the use of personal illustrations. He writes:

Probably nothing else we say about illustrations will be as debatable as this piece of advice, but we are great believers in using tasteful, appropriate personal illustrations. Other kinds of stories and anecdotes may work fine, but you will be amazed to discover that the people who give you their time every Sunday morning are most interested in your personal stories. They enjoy hearing about your struggles, your victories, and even your thoughts. They don't have to be stories of earth-shattering drama or personal crisis, just little insights that shed some light on the subject of the text.⁷⁶

⁷³Dever and Alexander, *The Deliberate Church*, 44.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 48.

⁷⁶York and Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance*, 166.

It is important to be careful about making personal illustrations too personal. It is also important to ask permission from family members before using them in an illustration. While there might be some danger in using too many or even the wrong personal illustrations it is the conviction of this author, that transparency and personal illustrations in the pulpit will help you connect with your audience and will help them develop a sense of trust. Not only do personal illustrations shed light on the text but they also help the preacher develop a rapport with his congregation. An example of a personal illustration that helped this author shed some light on the subject of love while preaching on leaving your first love was as follows:

Love is such a generic word. We talk about loving every thing. We love hot dogs and tacos. We love ice cream and chocolate cake. I love my wife and kids. Now you know I don't love my wife like I love chocolate cake. She gets real close to measuring up to chocolate cake. I watch all these young people come in here with starry eyes and they are in love. They may even say "I have fallen in love." You better be careful with that because whatever you fall into, you can climb out of. This whole idea of romantic falling in love is not real biblical and offers no security. I do remember the very first time I told my wife I loved her. She was working, of all places, at a bingo parlor. I went up there to visit her one night because it was close to my house. I talked to her while she was on her break. When her break was about over and it was time for me to go, I looked at her in the eyes and said, "I love you." She looked back somewhat shocked and said, "I love you, too." That was very sweet and special. Later on she told me she didn't even mean it at the time. I asked her why she said it back. Do you know what she said? She said she felt sorry for me and she didn't want me to feel like an idiot so she said, I love you too. Now I thought that was a special moment, but she was just pacifying me. I do think over time that has changed. I'm pretty sure she loves me now. (Looking at my wife I said,) Don't you?

This personal illustration connected with this author's audience on several levels. They liked hearing about the pastor's courtship. They could identify with the emotion of saying "I love you" for the first time. They saw the idea of a first love on a human level,

which shed light on the text. And besides all that they loved to hear a self-effacing story where the pastor's wife got one up on him.

Illustrations in sermons are very powerful. The preacher may not want to hear it but, his congregation remembers his illustrations far better than they remember the points of his sermons. Illustrations help the preacher strike the balance between content and emotion. York puts it this way, "By illustrating the sermon, we are able to shed light on the text and make its meaning plain, establish an emotional connection with our hearers, and provide a hook by which they can remember and apply the exhortations of the sermon."⁷⁷

When Jesus taught and preached he made it simple and directed it toward the common uneducated people. While He taught doctrine and principles he did so in a most unique way. He used stories and parables. He told stories like The Rich Man and Lazarus, The Prodigal Son, and The Good Samaritan. All of these stories illustrated some important points with an emotional appeal. One writer explains:

Over and over again, Jesus tugged at the hearts of his audience. Sometimes his words startled and shocked, but they nevertheless connected on an emotional level, not primarily a cerebral level. Imagine being with him when a Gentile woman came and asked for a miracle. Contrary to anything we might expect, Jesus answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs" (Mark 7:27). Yet Jesus knew exactly what he was doing, In being so raw and apparently abrasive, he was demonstrating the faith of the woman and her correct comprehension that she was not worthy of God's grace. Then he used the incident to teach a lesson about faith.⁷⁸

⁷⁷Ibid., 150.

⁷⁸Ibid., 150-152.

Hershael York provides the acrostic S H A R P to think through how to illustrate ones point.⁷⁹ S stands for story. Jesus' teachings are full of stories and people in our culture love to hear stories. H stands for humor. There are other ways to be humorous than just jokes. As a matter of fact some have suggested that jokes are not the best way to use humor, especially if you are not one of those few people who can tell jokes well. Humor predisposes people to like you, and if they like you they will listen to what you have to say. A stands for analogies. Jesus used them when He told parables. R is for references. One can reference a well know fact or the words of a popular person. P stands for pictures. In reference to pictures York writes:

In addition to making your own presence as interesting as possible, give your listeners something visual to look at whenever it is appropriate, Make your sermonmemorable with the use of bold, striking graphic aids, props, overheads, computer presentations, or other sensory enhancements.

Pastors, professors, and teachers are increasingly finding the benefit of using PowerPoint presentations as they speak. Coupled with a fill-in-the-blank outline, sermon and lesson outlines flashed on a screen behind and active speaker are a powerful combination.

For added impact, mix assorted kinds of media (for example, use projected outlines and video clips of appropriate testimonies) in order to keep the visual dimension varied and interesting. Rehearse the visual part of your presentation so transitions will be fluid rather than fumbling. Involve your listeners with your visuals; for example, ask questions of your audience and briefly tabulate their answers on an overhead transparency.⁸⁰

With such a statement about different forms of pictures, it appears that York does not adhere to the regulative principle of worship. The question now comes of how far one should go with illustrating with pictures. A few possibilities are that of dance, drama, monologs, videos, etc.

⁷⁹Ibid., 158-162.

⁸⁰Ibid., 162.

Vines and Shaddix say that while visual illustrations can be a useful tool, it is important that they do not become a crutch. “They should be used, not overused and abused. Some pastors unwittingly use visual aids as a substitute for preaching. Instead of delivering biblical exposition, they simply deliver a presentation that is a series of comments sandwiched between slides or introducing and concluding a drama.”⁸¹

Vines and Shaddix believe that video clips and drama are very helpful in making a connection with the contemporary world and showing the relevance of Biblical truth. Though one must use discretion, familiar movies or television programs can be extremely helpful in helping people identify with certain concepts. It is important that the preacher makes sure that the videos or dramas are not left to the listener’s interpretation. The preacher should always make a clear connection with his message.⁸²

This author would not go so far as to say that traditional oral preaching will fade away as Chris Seay claims, “I don’t think we will have master orators much longer. . . . Art, dance, and music are new forces that will play increasingly larger roles’ if the church is to be relevant to the Millennials, today’s teens and young adults.”⁸³ Yet, the use of modern day visual aids can assist the Bible communicator greatly. Whether it be drama, video, or even dance. Being one who has adopted the normative principle of worship, this author believes that there are a number of means to communicate the Gospel in a worship service, as long as they are tasteful and not contrary to scripture.

⁸¹Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 334.

⁸²Ibid., 336.

⁸³Bird, “Preaching in the 21st Century.”

CHAPTER 4

DECLINING CHURCHES

For those who are familiar with the 21st century church, it is no secret that a great number of churches in America are at a plateau or in decline. According to *Baptist Press* seventy percent of Southern Baptist churches are plateaued or declining:

The new study, led by Bill Day, associate director of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary's Leavell Center for Evangelism and Church Health, ranked congregations in the Southern Baptist Convention according to frequently used definitions for growing, declining and plateaued churches. Growing churches are those whose total membership increased at least 10 percent over five years, while declining churches are those whose total membership decreased at least 10 percent over five years. A plateaued church is one that is in neither the growing nor the declining category.

From 1978 to 1983, the Sunday School Board (now LifeWay Christian Resources) found that 30.5 percent of churches were growing, 51.9 percent were plateaued and 17.6 were in decline. In the years studied by the Leavell Center, 1998—2003, 30.3 percent of churches were growing. And though that statistic has remained basically unchanged for 20 years, the number of declining Southern Baptist churches has increased by 6 percent from 17.6 percent to 23.9 percent. Plateaued churches now compromise 45.8 percent of all Southern Baptist churches.

According to the SBC's website, there are more than 42,000 Southern Baptist churches in the United States. Using the Leavell Center's findings, fewer than 13,000 of them are growing churches. In other words, 70 percent of Southern Baptist churches are still plateaued or declining.⁸⁴

Some churches are experiencing decline because of a low number of baptisms. A low number of baptisms is another way of saying that the church is not reaching people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Many churches are experiencing decline because they struggle with retaining those they reach. A low number of baptisms and the proverbial "back door" are only two of many symptoms of the declining church. If the

⁸⁴ Michael McCormack, "Study updates stats on health of Southern Baptist churches" (*Baptist Press*, Nov. 15, 2004) [on-line]; accessed 8 February 2007; available from <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=19542>; Internet.

preacher is to cater his sermons to effect change in declining churches it is imperative to know what a declining church looks like.

Characteristics of the Declining Churches

It has already been stated that a declining church will have low baptisms and will have a low retention rate but there is much more to a declining church than that. Maybe the best way to describe a declining church is to explain what a declining church is not. It is obvious that a declining church is not healthy. In order to find out what an unhealthy church is, one must look at the characteristics of a healthy church. It is important to note that church health is not about size. Gene Wood, who is the author of *Leading Turnaround Churches*, affirms that church health is not about size when he writes, "Smaller churches can be healthy. Large churches can be sick. A few pastors are uncomfortable talking about change because they fear a knee-jerk reaction from laypeople afraid of becoming a mega-church. They can relax. Few need worry about becoming a mega-church."⁸⁵ Wood continues by stating, "Size really is not the issue for a turn around leader. The focus should be health, not size."⁸⁶

In a class called Healthy Church Leadership, taught by Dr. Dave Earley at Liberty Theological Seminary the week of January 1-5, 2007, he list several leaders and what they believe are the characteristics of a healthy leader.⁸⁷ He addressed the beliefs of

⁸⁵Gene Wood, *Leading Turnaround Churches* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources 2001), 20.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Rick Warren: 1. A long-term pastorate; 2. A clear purpose -- "Warren writes that a church will grow warmer through fellowship, deeper through discipleship, stronger through worship, broader through ministry and larger through evangelism.." 3. Strong organization --

such leaders as Rick Warren, Leith Anderson, and George Barna. Several of these characteristics are consistent with one another.

Based on Acts 11 and 13 Dr. Dave Earley explains that there are ten marks of an effective (healthy) church.⁸⁸ The marks are as follows:

1. EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM

Acts 11:19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ... and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

2. MULTICULTURAL OUTREACH AND APPEAL

Acts 11:19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good

Leith Anderson: 1. Glorify God; 2. Producing disciples; 3. Exercise of spiritual gifts
4. Relating positively to one's environment; 5. Reproduction; 6. Incorporation of newcomers; 7. Openness to change; 8. Trusting God & prayer;

The Nine Habits of Highly Effective Churches:

George Barna: 1. They rely upon strategic leadership; 2. They are organized to facilitate highly effective ministry; 3. They emphasize developing significant relationships within the congregation; 4. They invest themselves in genuine worship; 5. They engage in strategic evangelism; 6. They get their people involved in systematic theological growth; 7. They utilize holistic stewardship practices; 8. They serve the needy people in their community; 9. They equip families to minister to themselves.

⁸⁸ This material came from a class called Healthy Church Leadership, taught by Dr. Dave Earley at Liberty Theological Seminary the week of January 1-5, 2007.

news about the Lord Jesus.

3. EVIDENCE OF GOD'S PRESENCE AND PLEASURE

21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. 22 News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. God was pleased with what they were doing and put his stamp of approval on it ...God was behind it all...

4. GODLY LEADERSHIP

11:24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith ...13:2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting...

5. VISIBLE GROWTH AND STRENGTH

24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. The community grew large and strong in the Master.

6. STRONG TEACHING

25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.

7. RESPONSIVE GENEROSITY

27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during

the reign of Claudius.) 29 The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. 30 This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

8. SPIRIT-SOAKED WORSHIP

13:1 In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. 2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said. . .

9. FASTING AND PRAYER FOR GUIDANCE

3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

10. MULTIPLICATION BY SENDING OUT LEADERS

2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Considering many of the previously stated definitions of healthy and effective churches, one can look at the opposite definition and discover what a declining, plateaued or unhealthy church looks like. For example, if a healthy church is evangelistic then an unhealthy church is not evangelistic. If a healthy church multiplies leaders then an unhealthy church fails to multiply leaders. One can conclude what an unhealthy church is by understanding what a healthy church is. Upon understanding the

characteristics of an unhealthy church one can receive some insight into what one needs to preach to effect turn around.

Causes of the Declining Church

It may appear to some leaders that church decline came upon them suddenly and without warning. Yet there are some signs that a particular church is about ready to find herself on a steep decline. Gene Wood lists several indicators that a church is headed toward plateau and decline. They are as follows:

1. Extreme and continued member dissatisfaction. When people's needs are not being met, problems lie ahead.
2. Low morale. When regular participants fail to see evidence of life (fruit bearing), they lose a heart for sacrifice and investment in the efforts of the church.
3. Declining or negative bottom lines. While numbers of worshipers, baptisms and dollars are not the sole criteria for gauging health, they are significant indicators.⁸⁹

Wood continues by addressing the more subtle diagnostic indicators that can lead to the death of a church:

1. The church consistently rewards activities unrelated to the main thing. This might be increasing the support of missionaries who do not fulfill your purpose statement, or placing people into positions of leadership who evidence no commitment to what your church purpose statement claims to uphold as important.
2. Activities do not follow purpose. The more programs the better, or so it seems. Yet, in many cases, these programs, which drain the church budget of thousands of dollars and demand thousands of man-hours, do little to produce fruit. Despite the fact that these programs do not produce character or conversions, they continue year after year. Numerous sacred cow programs are a sure sign a church is in trouble.
This might be referred to as corporate cognitive dissonance. The cognitive dissonance theory assumes humans are cognitive beings. That is, what they

⁸⁹Wood, *Leading Turnaround Churches*, 19.

believe must match what they do or one of three results will be forthcoming. One, they will change their behavior. Two, they will alter their beliefs. Or, three, they will go crazy.

In the church the purpose statement (the main thing) expresses the core values. The programs are what they actually do. When the two do not line up, a form of schizophrenia develops and the congregation becomes dysfunctional.

3. The phantom limb complex exists. Individuals who have a limb amputated may still feel pain in that absent limb, or reach to scratch it. The automatic nervous system is causing them to respond through habit to non-existing needs. Is your church still holding services which meet no one's needs? Is your church practicing evangelistic methods which reach few? Are you insisting on a music style totally irrelevant to the community which you are desiring to touch?
4. There is evidence of a dead man walking. Does the church appear to have much motion without any awareness of purpose or plan? Three questions need to be asked. Can workers in the church articulate the main thing? Do workers understand how what they do contributes to the main thing? Do workers feel freedom to make adjustments to contribute better to the main thing?⁹⁰

When a church fails to reach people and fails to retain growth it is imperative for the church to ask what is the cause. There are several reasons that a church is successful and there are several reasons that a church experiences decline. When one looks at the effective elements within a strong and growing church, one can ascertain that not having these elements may be the cause of church decline.

Studies show that there are several elements that contribute to an effective church. One thing that demonstrates the effectiveness of these elements is that they are things that the formerly unchurched said led them to come back for a second visit and eventually choose a particular church.⁹¹ This shows us that the lack of these elements contribute to a declining church.

The first thing that contributes to a declining church is inadequate

⁹⁰Ibid., 19-20.

⁹¹Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*, 21.

preaching and pastors. People who return to a church for a second and third visit, and who eventually become a part of that church, do so because the pastor and his preaching played a major role. Ninety percent of the people that choose a Church say that the pastor was the key to their choosing. Issues, such as preaching that has life application, pastors that are down to earth and personal, pastors that can communicate, and pastors that can lead with conviction, are important to church health, growth and retention.⁹² The statement that has been popularized by John Maxwell is true, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.”⁹³

Secondly, a declining church neglects doctrine. Studies show that even unbelievers are interested in what the church believes about God, Jesus, The Holy Spirit, and the like. Most people are interested in a church that will stick to their guns regarding what they believe. The unchurched and the formerly unchurched seem to have a greater interest in doctrine than long-term Christians. People are not just impressed with the facts of doctrine, but they are impressed with a church that is willing to take a stand.⁹⁴

A third thing that causes a church to decline is unfriendly members.⁹⁵ Many, if not most churches claim to be friendly. Unfortunately, members are often friendly with other members but guests sometimes are made to feel that they are intruding. It is important for members not only to be friendly with guests but it is important for members to include guests and make them feel like a part of the church

⁹²Ibid., 54-68.

¹⁰”Leadership,” [on-line]; accessed 25 November 2007; available from <http://www.utpb.edu/jbs/quotes2.htm>; Internet.

⁹⁴Ibid., 126.

⁹⁵Ibid., 21.

before they become a part of the church. As Rick Warren once said, “People are not looking for friendly churches, they are looking for friends.”⁹⁶ If the church is to be friendly she must be willing to meet people where they are. It has been this author’s experience that people have a hard time accepting people that are different than themselves; especially if those people have a sordid past. Sometimes people in the local church feel that they are pretty good people and when someone who has a questionable past comes in they are not welcomed. It is necessary that the long-standing members of the church be reminded that we are all sinners in need of a savior and “whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all” (James 2:10).

A fourth factor that contributes to a declining church is non-witnessing members. Many people go to a particular church because a friend or family member witnessed to them or invited them. Relationships are the key in reaching people with the Gospel and contributing to the growth of the church. Not only are relationships important but relationships with family members are especially important.⁹⁷ Too often members believe that the pastor is the hired hand to reach the lost. The Bible clearly teaches that the pastor is the equipper of the people so that the people can do the work of ministry. Ephesians 4:11-12 states, “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” This author communicates to his congregation, “As the pastor it is not my job to do ministry. As a

⁹⁶Raelle Landowski, “SuperConference 2003: Encourage people to believe, belong, and become,” [on-line]; accessed 25 November 2007; available from <http://www.pastors.com/RWMT/article.asp?ArtID=4695>; Internet.

⁹⁷Ibid., 82.

pastor it is my job to equip you to do ministry. As a Christian it is my job to do ministry.” Many churches fail to reach people with the Gospel of Jesus because members are not witnessing members.

Another cause of a declining church is an unappealing atmosphere where God’s presence is not sensed.⁹⁸ The spiritual climate of a church has to be right in order to grow and be able to reach people with the Gospel. It has been the experience of this author that people are attracted to a fervent, passionate, unified, loving and celebrative atmosphere. People are not attracted to a stiff, formal and inauthentic church or atmosphere. Too many people walk into a worship service and find it stale, ritualistic and uninspiring. A worship service should not only inform, but it should also inspire.

A final cause for a declining church is a lack of small group involvement. While a meaningful worship service is the front door to the church and gets people to come back a second and third time, Sunday School, or some other small group involvement, is what gets people connected with other people and keeps them involved and committed.

Needs of the Declining Church

If a church is in decline it is obvious that that church has some needs. Since two major indicators of a declining church are a lack of conversions or baptisms, and the inability to retain members, then these are the issues that need to be addressed in relationship to a declining church’s needs. First of all, the question of what makes a

⁹⁸Ibid., 20.

church evangelistic needs to be addressed. Second, the question of how a church can retain her members needs to be considered.

An evangelistic church has many characteristics and uses several different methods when it comes to evangelism. These churches use methods such as music ministry, youth ministry, weekly outreach events, and relational evangelism in order to win people to faith in Christ. Yet, according to Thom Rainer the top three methods that evangelistic churches of all sizes use are preaching, prayer, and Sunday School.⁹⁹ The top of the three methods is preaching. Not only does the Bible teach that preaching is to be primary, but practically speaking, the evidence shows that when preaching is primary the church experiences conversion growth. Some may assume that other methods are necessary in order to reach the lost. While other methods can be effective the most effective method is strong Biblical preaching. If there is anything that a declining church needs it is a well prepared, applicable, relevant, and powerful pulpit ministry. Research shows that nothing can take the place of a strong preaching ministry. Some wrongly believe that in order to be evangelistic a church needs to put its focus on event evangelism and seeker services. According to Rainer few churches that have been effective in evangelism use event evangelism or seeker services.¹⁰⁰

For a church to turn around from a declining position it is imperative for the church to close the back door and retain the members she gains. Thom Rainer wrote, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church*. This book's title and sub-title says a lot about its content. Rainer believes, and research shows, that one way to close the back door and retain people is to have expectations for

⁹⁹Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, 13-17.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 29, 46.

them and to clearly communicate those expectations. Many people never do what is expected of them because they do not know that there are any expectations. There are several ways to assimilate members and communicate what is expected. Factors for such assimilation and retention include follow up, new member classes, leadership development, Sunday School or small group involvement, ministry delegation and expository preaching. Once again preaching is mentioned as it relates to turning around a declining church. Rainer writes, “Although expository preaching was rated the highest single factor in our earlier study on evangelistic churches, we were surprised to discover that it was strongly correlated to closing the back door.”¹⁰¹ He continues, “Indeed in this study, expository preaching was second only to Sunday School among methodologies that are effective in assimilation.”¹⁰²

While the needs of declining churches may vary depending on a particular church and her needs, it is certain that the primary need of a declining church is preaching. Preaching should not and can not be overrated. Preaching can be the tool that God uses to address the other needs a particular church may have. As the Word of God is preached, addressing the various needs of the church, God will use His Word to change hearts and the direction of people’s lives. When people’s hearts and lives are changed they will persevere and reach out and the church will cease to decline.

¹⁰¹Rainer, *High Expectations*, 16.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*

CHAPTER 5

TURN AROUND PREACHING

Bob Russell may not know what it is like to turn around a church, but he is familiar with what it takes to grow a great church. A lot of the principles for growing and turning around a church are the same. Russell was used of God to grow one of the largest churches in the United States. After being the Senior Minister of Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, for many years, he wrote: *When God Builds a Church: 10 Principles for Growing a Dynamic Church*. Russell's very first principle and first chapter is all about proclaiming the truth of God's word and applying it.¹⁰³ The preaching of the word has become underrated in many Christian circles. Some groups replace the preaching of the Word with praise and worship services, where there is little to no preaching, just singing. While a song service may be appropriate from time to time it is important for the worship service to have a steady diet of Biblical preaching and teaching. When it comes to preaching that grows a church, Russell believes it is important to instill the importance of preaching in our young people, preach using lots of scripture, and balance strong stands with God's grace. He also believes in the importance of providing application that people can plug into their life on Monday. It is also good to use illustrations and steps to victory.

Preaching is to be held in high regard as an essential ministry of the church. One only needs to take a glance through the scripture to discover its importance.

¹⁰³Russell, *When God Builds a Church*, 13-37.

Jesus was a preacher. He said that He must preach the good news because that's why He was sent (Luke 4:43). Two other Biblical figures who were preachers that put a lot of emphasis on preaching were John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul. As a matter of fact the Apostle Paul was not overly concerned with the motives of certain preachers, he was just glad that Christ was being preached. In Philippians 1:18 Paul states, "But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice" (NIV).

Steve Scoggins believes that there is a kind of preaching that turns a church around. He writes:

Not long ago I had the privilege of doing a workshop on variety in worship styles and programming in a local church. I shared with the participants some of the creative things that we are doing at First Baptist Church, Hendersonville. We now have five Sunday worship services using three different worship styles. A host of ministries have sprung up over the past few years meeting needs from Christian dieting to surviving a divorce. After the workshop was over, I felt convicted by the Lord that I had given the participants the wrong impression. I had led them to believe that if they will start new types of worship services or if they will involve themselves in creative ministries their church will automatically grow. These programs and worship styles had enabled us to meet the needs of those coming into the church, but they were not the reason why people were coming and staying. People came because their needs were being met in the preaching. It was the power of God's Word that was bringing them in and bringing them life! Preaching is God's primary method of bringing life to a declining church.

God reminded me of Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. Ezekiel saw the valley filled with dead men's bones and asked, "can these bones ever live again." God's answer was, "Start preaching!" As Ezekiel preached, he saw the most amazing thing. Bone joined together with bone, and skeletons of people began to emerge. Ezekiel asked God what to do next. God replied, "Keep preaching." As he continued preaching, the bones took on flesh and began to breathe again. Ezekiel asked God what to do next. God replied, "Keep on preaching." So he continued preaching and the valley of people became a marching army.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴Steve Scoggins, "How to Breathe New Life into a Declining Church" *The Baptist Start Page* [on-line]; accessed 8 February 2007; available from http://www.baptiststart.com/print/new_life_into_church.html; Internet.

Scoggins continues by listing and describing five characteristics of preaching that turns churches around. Those characteristics are as follows:

1. Preaching that turns churches around is Biblical:
Spurgeon was once asked if he spent time defending the Bible. His insightful answer shows his confidence in the power of God's word: "Defend the Bible? Why you might as well defend a lion. You don't defend the Bible, you just let it loose!" Paul expressed it this way, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation."
Baptists have always been known for their Bible preaching. One of the healthiest emphases in our seminaries has been the stress given to expository preaching. When people come to church they want to find it necessary to open their Bibles and dig in with real study. A sermon that breathes life into a congregation is one that is filled with constant references to the Biblical text and its principles. Though most Baptist preachers are preaching the Bible, not all churches are coming alive. There are three other ingredients in this Biblical preaching that must be there as well.
2. Preaching that turns churches around must be relevant:
My task is to give out more than Biblical information. I need to make sure that the Biblical principles I share are the ones the people need in their every day lives. Too often we preachers are answering questions that nobody else but preachers are asking.
A few years ago I began a series on Galatians. In my introductory sermon, I thought about dealing with some of the scholarly issues, such as when was the book written-before or after the Jerusalem conference of Acts 15? As excited as I was about seeking out the answer to this question, it dawned on me that no one in my congregation was sitting on the edge of their seat waiting for my opinion. I realized I was going to be preaching to people who were surviving cancer, facing business struggles, praying for wayward teens, or going through divorces.
Preaching that changes lives has a balance that is hard to maintain. In order to produce relevant preaching, I must spend both time with God in my study and time with the people in my church field. If the preacher spends only time in his study, he becomes out of touch and irrelevant. If the preacher spends only time in the field with his flock, he soon becomes shallow in his preaching.
A preacher needs to find ways to find out what his people are needing and thinking. I ask God to alert me in the course of my pastoral duties as to what people need at any given time. If someone comes to me with a puzzling question or a difficult problem, I assume that there are hundreds of others who are facing the same things. Periodically, I pass out note cards and ask people to share with me either problems they are facing or questions they have about the Christian life. I have used their responses as basis for special series of sermons. By doing this, it gives the people a sense of ownership in the preaching of the church and lets me know that I am "scratching where they are itching."

3. Preaching that turns churches around is understandable:
A preacher who preaches over the heads of his people isn't smart. He just has bad aim. My job is to communicate the truth so that the people will be able to obey God's word.
One of the best ways to make a sermon understandable is to use good illustrations. Steve Brown, the teacher on the Key Life Radio Network, once said, "If you can't illustrate it, don't preach it." The fact that you can illustrate it means that you have grasped it. For every point I make in a sermon, I tell a story to illustrate the principle. That was Jesus' method of teaching!
4. Preaching that turns churches around is passionate:
I've heard too many preachers who preach with all the enthusiasm of reading a two-week old newspaper. Our message is the best news the world has ever heard. We have the high privilege of preaching the most exciting Book in all the world. When I say that someone must preach with passion, I am not necessarily talking about how much volume is being used. There are some who preach with great gestures and shouts, but are obviously imitating some other preacher they have heard rather than preaching from their heart. More than ever before, congregations demand sincerity from the pastor and in the sermons. I ask myself two questions each time before I preach? First, "Do I really believe what I am about to say." Secondly, I ask myself, "Is what I am about to say really important?" If I am convinced of both of those issues, a fire and sincerity flows through my delivery. It will be a message from one person's heart directed to another's heart.¹⁰⁵

It has already been established that preaching is important if a church is going to be evangelistic and cease to decline. Furthermore, it is necessary to observe what models of preaching have been effective in being evangelistic. As stated earlier, not only does this author believe that expository preaching is the most biblical, but evidence shows that the most evangelistic church's preferred model for preaching is expository. According to Thom Rainer the vast majority of evangelistic churches have pastors whose sermons are predominantly expository and textual, while a few evangelistic churches described their preaching style as topical and thematic. Of the evangelistic churches studied by Rainer 73.6% describe their sermons as expository/textual, 15.1% described

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

their sermons as thematic/life application, 5.7% said they were topical, 1.9% stated they preached narrative, while 3.7% gave no response. In order to clarify preaching styles

Rainer provides the following definitions:

1. Expository
An Expository sermon contains a clear statement of the biblical idea that is legitimately derived from a passage or passages of Scripture.
2. Textual
Textual sermons tend to be shorter text than expository sermons and lean toward topical styles, but they are focused on a biblical text and the message of that text.
3. Topical
The best understanding seems to be that this approach is driven by a subject and the subject matched to Scripture. Usually used when it does not appear that there is text that speaks directly to the subject.
4. Thematic
The purpose of this sermon is to identify the principles that help Christians understand God and their faith. The better use of this model will carefully show how the listeners can apply the message of the text in their own walk of faith.
5. Narrative
The narrative sermon is a story that, from the outset to conclusion, binds the entire message to a single plot as theme. This is a sermon-as-story understanding of the text.
6. Other
Anything that does not fit into the above models.¹⁰⁶

There appears to be a strong connection between expository preaching and conservative theology. That is not to say that those who preach with other styles are not conservative, but those who gave an explanation for why they preach expositional sermons connect it to their conservative belief about the Bible. One South Carolina pastor said it this way, “If one truly believes that the Bible is the Word of God without error, then the Bible must be the basis for the sermon.”¹⁰⁷ He further explained, “While

¹⁰⁶Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, 57.

we who preach the Word must use our God-given abilities to make the text applicable for today, we still first preach the text in its historical context. It is the preached Word that has power, not the opinions of men.”¹⁰⁸

In *High Expectations* Rainer shows that not only is expository preaching the most prominent style for churches that are evangelistic, but it is also the most prominent style for churches that are retaining members. Rainer writes, “The most significant finding was the high correlation between expository preaching and evangelistic effectiveness in these churches.”¹⁰⁹ He continues, “The research for the book you are reading demonstrated once again the importance of preaching—this time in closing the back door.”¹¹⁰ Rainer follows up with a quote from a high expectation pastor from Maryland who said, “My preaching can help close the back door in two ways. First, so many sermons can state clearly the high expectations associated with following Christ. But the most important part of preaching is just letting the Word speak for itself. The Holy Spirit will do the work of convicting during the sermon.”¹¹¹

Not only do churches that are evangelistic and retain members preach expository sermons, but research shows that that the formerly unchurched were attracted to the churches and pastors whose sermons were expository. Churches that attract the unchurched are churches that have predominately expository sermons.¹¹² Besides being

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 56.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Rainer, *High Expectations*, 69.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹Ibid., 69-70.

¹¹²Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*, 215.

expository, there are other characteristics to the preaching that connects to the unchurched. Thom Rainer provides five adjectives that describe the kind of sermons that connect.¹¹³

First, preaching that connects needs to be Biblical. Biblical preaching means that the preacher depends on the Bible as his source of authority. The Bible is sufficient. It also means that the Biblical text is to be the focus of the sermon. The foundation of the sermon is not illustrations, philosophical propositions, nor scientific notions. The basis and foundation of the sermon is what God says in his Word. Biblical preaching also means explaining the historical context of a passage so as to make proper implications and application.

Second, preaching that connects is relevant. Preaching is not to just be a history lesson. It needs to connect to where people live and what they are going through. A Biblical message that doesn't apply to its hearers is of little use. It is not as if the preacher needs to make the Bible relevant, for the Bible is relevant. When the Bible is applied to the hearers' lives when it is preached, it reveals to the hearers just how relevant the Bible is. As Hershael York puts it, the sermon should answer the question, "So What?". This author has heard people of his congregation make positive comments about the application and relevance of his congregation. Some have suggested that he has been reading their mail and some have even made comments about picking on them, thinking that the pastor knew what was going on in their life. One family said, "That preacher talks about every day real life." What a great comment for the preacher that wants to connect with the unchurched.

¹¹³Ibid., 217-220.

Third, preaching that connects is transparent. It is important for people to know that the preacher is human and can identify with what they are going through. He understands their struggles because he has similar ones. This is not to say that the preacher should air all his dirty laundry, but it is important that those he speaks to know he is real and has feet of clay. In a day when there has been so much scandal in the church it is imperative the church leaders be and look authentic if they are to be believable to a skeptical world. One can show his authenticity by publicly apologizing and acknowledging when he is wrong. Another way to show authenticity is by being able to laugh at oneself and sharing stories that are self-effacing. The preacher should take God's Word and his responsibility seriously while not taking himself too serious. If the preacher is not authentic, it may be that those listening to him won't believe that Christ is authentic. This author recently had a church member tell him that her family likes coming to her church because the preacher is a real guy. They said that he is not like a preacher, he's like a real person. As the preacher, this author took that comment as a great compliment. This author also had a deacon tell him that because of his transparency and vulnerability people feel comfortable talking to him about anything without the fear of being condemned. If the preacher will be transparent in his preaching he will open himself up to minister to more people.

Another adjective for preaching that connects is illustrative. Preachers that connect make proper use of illustrations in their sermons. While the illustrations are not the central aspect of the sermon, they do shed some light on the central aspect of the sermon that is rooted in the text of scripture. Some preachers spend hours every week

researching illustrations, convinced that they are important to use in preaching since Jesus made use of them.

A final adjective for preaching that connects with people is well-prepared. Effective church pastors spend on the average of 22 hours a week in sermon preparation. Comparison church pastors spend four hours on average in sermon preparation. This author has certain people comes out of worship on a regular basis and tell him how impressed they are with the time he puts into preparation. When the preacher prepares, it communicates that he takes the Word and his responsibility serious. The pastors of effective churches spend a large amount of time in sermon preparation. That is not to say that he does not spend time doing other things, but a large amount of his time is dedicated to studying for sermons.

This author has had pastor friends to tell him that preaching is not as important as some suggest. They have said that the pastor needs to spend most of his time doing other things, such as hospital visitation and administrative work. One even said that preaching has nothing to do with turning around a declining church. The evidence shows contrary. Research shows that preaching plays a major role in turning around a declining church and the pastor who is going to lead such a church needs to spend ample time in sermon preparation and sermon delivery.

CHAPTER 6

WHAT TO PREACH

Scriptures That Apply

One thing that a declining Church needs is revival. Revival carries the idea of recovering, repairing, or restoring. It is obvious that a church in a state of decline needs all the above. The word revival presupposes life. One can only revive that which already had vitality. One analogy for revival involves a person who has nearly drowned. Some heroic citizen dives in the water to retrieve this person. The person has no pulse and then the citizen works on the victim until he eventually comes back to life. The Church that is in decline needs spiritual life breathed back into her.

It needs to be stated that revival is not an act of man but an act of God. Revival is a sovereign work and move of God that man can not schedule. While God's people can not bring about revival, they can set their sails to catch the winds of revival when God decides to send it.

There are several Old Testament passages that deal with the need Israel had for revival. While the New Testament church is not Israel, just like Israel is the people of God, so is the Church the people of God. These passages of Scripture have implications for the people of God, whether they be Old Testament covenant people of Israel or New Testament covenant people called the Church. It would be helpful for the church that is experiencing decline to meditate on the following text. It would also be wise for the pastor of such a church to exegete and preach such passages to show the church her need

for revival.

“Turn us, O God of our salvation, and cause thine anger toward us to cease. Wilt thou be angry with us for ever? Wilt thou draw out thine anger to all generations? Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee?” Psalm 85:4-6.

This prayer concedes that the trouble that Israel was facing was an indication of God’s disapproval. While no confession of sin is clearly expressed, it seems to be implied in verses three and eight.¹¹⁴ While all trouble is not a sign of God’s disapproval there are times when God allows His children to face the consequences of their actions, and at times He disciplines His children that disobey. The Church that is declining needs to examine herself and ask God to reveal anything in her life that is causing Him to be displeased. Matthew Henry wrote, “The Lord’s people may expect sharp and tedious affliction when they commit sin; but when they return to him with humble prayer, he will make them again to rejoice in him.”¹¹⁵ John Wesley explains the terms “Turn us” and “Revive.” “Turn us – Restore us to our former tranquility, and free us from the troubles which we yet groan under. Revive us – Give us a second reviving in bringing home the rest of our brethren, and in restraining our enemies.”¹¹⁶ If the Church that is experiencing decline is to be turned and revived she must first cry out to God and confess any sort of unfaithfulness that the Church may be guilty of.

“For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is

¹¹⁴Kenneth Baker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible, 10th Anniversary Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 869.

¹¹⁵“Matthew Henry Concise Commentary,” in *The Bible Collection Deluxe* [CD], (Waconia, MN: ValuSoft, 2002).

¹¹⁶“John Wesley’s Commentary on the Whole Bible,” in *The Bible Collection Deluxe* [CD], (Waconia, MN: ValuSoft, 2002).

Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”

Isaiah 57:15 If the church is to be revived it is necessary that the church have the two qualities of humility and contriteness. There is no spiritual healing and restoration for the church that is full of arrogance, self-sufficiency and pride. God draws near to the people who are broken and humble while repelling from those that are prideful. John MacArthur wrote, “The Lord sends true revival, which comes to the humble and contrite (61:1-3; contra v.10). After all the years of Israel’s sin and backsliding, and of Israel’s punishment, God’s grace will prevail (43:25) and spiritual healing and restoration will come.”¹¹⁷

“They that dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall revive as the corn, and grow as the vine: the scent thereof shall be as the wine of Lebanon.” Hosea 14:7

John Wesley addresses the above text by writing:

They that dwell – As many as unite to the church, shall dwell under these spreading trees. Return – Revive and recover strength. As the corn – Which dies ere it lives to bring forth fruit. As the vine – Which in winter seems dead, but yet life, sap, and a fructifying virtue is in it. The scent thereof – The savour of it to God and good men shall be pleasing as the scent of the delicious wines of Lebanon.¹¹⁸

Another commentator comments by stating:

They that used to dwell under Israel’s shadow (but who shall have been forced to leave it), shall *return*, that is, be restored (Ezekiel 35:9). Others take “*His shadow*” to mean *Jehovah’s* (compare Psalms 17:8, 9:1, Isaiah 4:6), which Hosea 14:1, 2 (“*return unto the Lord,*” &c.) favor. But the “*his*” in Hosea 14:6 refers to Israel, and therefore must refer to the same here. Revive as...corn – As the corn long buried in the earth springs up, with an abundant produce, so shall they revive from their calamities, with a great increase of offspring (compare John 12:24). Scent thereof –

¹¹⁷John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word Bibles, 1997), 1043.

¹¹⁸“John Wesley’s Commentary on the Whole Bible,” in *The Bible Collection Deluxe* [CD], (Waconia, MN: ValuSoft, 2002).

that is, Israel's *fame*. Compare Hosea 14:6, "His smell as Lebanon"; Solomon 1:3: "Thy *name* is as ointment poured forth." The *Septuagint* favors the *Margin*, "memorial." As the wine of Lebanon – which was most celebrated for its aroma, flavor, and medicinal restorative properties.¹¹⁹

The following are other suggested Old Testament texts that can be used to teach a church about revival and turnaround:

"O LORD, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid: O LORD, revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy," Habakkuk 3:2

"Until the spirit be poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be counted for a forest." Isaiah 32:15

"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions:" Joel 2:28

Another way to study revival and turnaround in the Bible is to study the various characters that revival came under. The following is a list of those character and corresponding text: Joshua, Joshua 5:2-9; Samuel, 1Samuel 7:1-6; Elijah, 1Kings 18:17-40; Hezekiah, 2Kings 18 and 2Chronicals 29-31; Josiah, 2Kings 22-23 and 2Chronicals 34-35; Aza, 2Chronicals 14-15; and Manasseh 2Chronicals 33. One of the most successful and well known revivals in the scripture is when Jonah preached in Nineveh in Jonah 3:4-10.

There are many New Testament passages that can be connected to revival and

¹¹⁹“Jameison-Faussett-Brown,” in *The Bible Collection Deluxe* [CD], (Waconia, MN: ValuSoft, 2002).

turnaround. Most of such passages can be found in the historical book of Acts, beginning with the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 and beyond.

Suggestions for Preaching

In light of the importance of preaching and how it relates to church growth and health issues, the following are suggestions for what to preach. In discovering what one should preach to effect turn around in a particular church, one must determine what the big critical issues that particular church is facing. O. S. Hawkins stated that when he went to a church that was full of tension and strife with frayed relationships he preached through the book of Philemon and applied it to personal relationships. Hawkins wrote:

After all, life is about relationships. There are only three in life. An *outward expression*. This is the relationship we have in the home, at the office, in the social arena where we contact with others in interpersonal relationships. There in an *inward expression*. This is the relationship we have with ourselves. Some call it self-worth. And then there is the *upward expression*. This is an awesome thought. This is the ability to come into a relationship with God through the Lord Jesus in such a way that we can know Him in the intimacy of Father and child. And the bottom line? We will never be properly related to each other until we are properly related to others.¹²⁰

Below is an outline of Hawkins' series on Philemon:

1. The importance of *affirmation of one another* (vv. 4-7).
2. The importance of *accommodation of one another* (vv. 8-11).
3. The importance of *acceptance of one another* (vv. 12-16).
4. The importance of *allegiance to one another* (vv. 17-21).
5. The importance of *accountability to one another* (vv. 22-25).¹²¹

¹²⁰Hawkins, *The Pastor's Primer*, 36, 37.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 37-38.

When Hawkins went into a church in need of rebuilding after decline he preached through Nehemiah. His Nehemiah outline was as follows:

1. *Rebuilders get started right* (chapter one).
2. *Rebuilders build a team spirit* (chapter two).
3. *Rebuilders let go without letting up* (chapter three) [delegation].
4. *Rebuilders understand “YAC” is what really matters* (chapter four) [a football term meaning yards after contact; dealing with conflict head on].
5. *Rebuilders never cut what they can unite* (chapter five) [conflict resolution].
6. *Rebuilders finish strong* (chapter six) [stay focused].¹²²

When Hawkins went to a church that was withdrawing from culture instead of engaging it he preached through Daniel.¹²³ These messages can be found in Hawkins’ books. The outline of Hawkins on the book of Daniel is as follows:

1. *Part one: The remote control syndrome* (chapter one).

Don’t give in – be resistant. Don’t give up – be consistent. Don’t give out – be persistent.

2. *Part two: Real video: Back to the future* (chapter two).

God reveals the scope of human history with a statue. God reveals the hope of human history with a stone.

3. *Part three: You have what you tolerate* (chapter three).

Learning to live with pressure. Learning to live with principle. Learning to live with perspective. Learning to live with protection.

4. *Part four: On a search for significance* (chapter four).

The way down is up. The way up is down.

5. *Part five: God and graffiti – the handwriting is on the wall* (chapter five).

¹²²Ibid., 38-39.

¹²³Ibid., 36-41.

God is speaking on the point of our pride; our presumption; our promiscuity and our perversion.

6. *Part six: Integrity – don't leave home without it!* (chapter six).

Integrity is rooted in our private life. It is reflected in our personal life. It is reinforced in our professional life. It is revealed in our public life.

It could be that the declining church has lost her focus. With that in mind, a helpful series that could be preached in an expository fashion is the Five Purposes of the Church, popularized by Rick Warren. These purposes are worship, evangelism, discipleship, fellowship and ministry. The pastor would want to find portions of scripture that concentrate on each of these subjects and preach passionate, relevant, expository sermons that have engaging illustrations and application. These sermons should conclude with a challenge to be a church of purpose by being a people of purpose.

Closely related to Warren's five purposes of the Church is the acrostic F I I S H. F I I S H is a purpose strategy that was developed by one of this author's friends.¹²⁴ He has organized his Church and Sunday School classes around this acrostic so as to challenge his Church to fulfill her purpose. F stands for fellowship. The first I stands for instruction. The second I stands for intercession. S stands for service, while H stands for hope which is another way of saying evangelism. The following is a sample of a series of messages that this author has developed with the acrostic F I I S H.

The first message in the series is called *Focusing on Fellowship*. The first point is, "We are to have positional fellowship." According to 1John 1:3 this involves vertical relationship with the Savior and horizontal relationship with the Saints. Next, "We are to have practical fellowship." This involves special fellowship that is in the Gospel found

¹²⁴This Sunday School strategy was developed by John Mark Toby and Dan Garland. Toby is the Senior Pastor of Beacon Hill Baptist Church in Somerset, Kentucky and Garland is the Director of Pastoral Ministry & Church Consulting for LifeWay.

in Philippians 1:5. It also involves spiritual fellowship found in Philippians 2:1. This means being filled with the Holy Spirit. There is also sacrificial fellowship in Philippians 3:10 that may cost you time, energy and comfort.

The second message in the series is called *The Importance of Intercession*. The first point is, “We are to intercede for heads.” This is taken from 1 Timothy 2:1-2. Praying for heads implies praying for political and world wide leaders. It also involves interceding for pastors and church leaders. Second of all, “We are to intercede for healing,” and this comes from James 5:14. Third of all, “We are to intercede for the heathen.” In Romans 9:1-3 one will find Paul interceding with passion for the lost condition of his kinsmen. One will notice a similar intensity in Paul’s prayer in Romans 10:1-3.

Message number three is called *The Importance of Instruction*. Point one is called “The potency of a teacher,” found in James 3:1. The teacher teaches with his or her words, with his or her attitudes, and by his or her example. 2 Timothy speaks of the “The preparation of a teacher.” The Bible also addresses “the patience of a teacher,” in 2 Timothy 4:2. Finally, there is “The practicality of the teacher.” According to James 1:22 teaching affects deeds and according to 2 Timothy 3:15, teaching affects peoples direction.

The fourth message in the F I I S H series is called *Saved to Serve*. This message is taken from Matthew 20:20-28. The first point is “A servant does not promote self,” (vv.20-21). Secondly, “A servant is humble,” (vv.22-23). Thirdly, “A servant is not envious,” (v. 24). Lastly, “A servant sees self as a servant, (vv.25-28).

The final message in this series deals with the all important subject of evangelism entitled, *A Great Hope*. This message is taken from Acts 1:8. The first point is “Our mission.” Verses 6-8 deal with the priority of the mission. Jesus told His disciples that their priority is not setting dates, but their priority is sharing the message of the gospel. Verse eight also deals with the person of the mission, which is “you” or the Christian. The text also addresses the power of the mission, which is the Holy Spirit. Second there is “Our Message.” The message is the “Me” of the text which is none other than Jesus Himself. 1 Corinthians 1:23 confirms that by saying “we preach Christ crucified.” Finally, there is “Our Method,” which is Jerusalem, Judah, and Samaria and the ends of the earth. The above messages with appropriate illustrations, application, fervency and anointing of the Holy Spirit can help the declining church refocus.

Another option for preaching for the declining church is to preach a series of messages through the book of Philippians. Philippians focuses on the unity that comes from being one in Christ and one in purpose. This book deals with one's mindset and joy. What one sets his or her mind on will have a lot to do with their level of joy. The Church is to have the mindset of Christ, which is primarily that of humility. Christ demonstrated humility by putting others first. This is seen in the fact that He left the splendor of heaven and came to this earth to die (Philippians 2:1-11). He also addresses the need to find contentment in Christ. Since a healthy church that is not declining needs prayer, humility, joy, contentment and a servant attitude, Philippians would be a great place to begin.

In light of the fact that the church is to be focused on Jesus, and that the issue of the declining church is the church, it would be wise to focus on text that address Christ

and His church in particular. This author is convinced that the section on scripture that deals with Christ and His church in a concise way is Revelation 1-3. Revelation, chapter one, focuses on the Lord Jesus Himself, while chapters two and three focus on the seven churches of Asia Minor and the issues connected to those churches. Those issues are similar with the issues that the present day declining churches are experiencing.

Conclusion

This author has made several discoveries as it relates to preaching and church revitalization. Seventy percent of Southern Baptist Churches have less than 400 members which says nothing of the small number of attendees. Many are at a plateau or declining. Some are not reaching people and others have a difficult time retaining those they seemingly reach. While there are many things that are needed to remedy the above, one is that of effective preaching.

There are several preaching styles. There are differences of opinions regarding how many styles there are. This author would strongly assert that the best, most biblical and most affective to bring about life change is expository preaching. Expository preaching provides divine authority to the sermon. It is the expository preacher who can say, "Thus saith the Lord," not merely about the scripture reading but also about the sermon. The sad fact is that many times preaching today is just one more piece of entertainment in the service. The latter may fill the church if the preacher is dynamic and has an endless supply of uplifting stories, but it fosters a consumer culture in the church instead of a discipleship mentality. It has been said that "soft preaching creates a hard heart while hard preaching creates soft hearts." To do it properly a sermon requires the

authority that biblical exposition provides. It was the approach to preaching that enabled Thomas Watson to tell his congregation, “Know that in every sermon preached, God calls to your; and to refuse the message we bring, it to refuse God Himself.”

Preaching that turns churches around is Biblical. The Apostle Paul defines Biblical preaching in 2 Timothy 4:2-3, “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His Kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.” Someone may ask why the Apostle Paul felt it necessary to exhort a Gospel preacher to be faithful to preach the word. The answer is found in verses 3-5 of the same chapter which states, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desire, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure affliction, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” The preacher needs to be encouraged to preach Biblical sermons because not everyone is going to appreciate truth.

This author recently had a church member criticize his sermon. The church members said, “I don’t come to church to hear that I’m a sinner. I don’t want to hear how bad I am. I want to be encouraged.” She informed this author that Jesus never confronted people by pointing out their sin but He always “drew people to Himself with non-judgmental love.” Obviously this lady had not read the Gospels closely. It was obvious that this lady did not come to church to hear the Gospel. The Gospel begins with the fact that we are sinners and that we can do nothing to save ourselves. One cannot properly declare the Gospel without first stating man’s desperate condition of sinfulness.

In Romans 1:16 Paul articulated his commitment to preach the truth by stating, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation." Baptists have always been recognized for their commitment to Bible preaching. One of the healthiest emphases in our institutions of higher learning has been the stress given to expository preaching. When people come to a place of worship they want to find it essential to unfasten their Bibles and burrow in with bona fide study. A homily that breathes life into people attending worship is one that is filled with regular references to what the Bible has to say and the principles found within.

It must be stated that this author is not referring to dry, boring and irrelevant messages when writing about expository sermons. Expository preaching does not suggest making a few tedious comments as the preacher reads through an extensive passage of scripture. Neither is it an immaterial history lesson that gives chronological and theological truths without pertinent life change. It is accurate that some so called sermons could be described as such, yet that is not what the author is endorsing as expository sermons. Preaching that turns churches around must be relevant. The preacher's responsibility is to give out more than Biblical insight. It is to make sure that the Biblical implications he shares are the ones the people need in their everyday lives. It has been well sated, that too often preachers are answering questions that no one but other preachers are asking. Preaching that changes lives has a poise that is hard to sustain. In order to construct pertinent preaching, the preacher must spend time in his study exploring the Word as well as with the people in the field. If the preacher only spends time in the study, he becomes irrelevant and too lofty to relate to the common people. If the preacher invests only time in the field with his people, he soon becomes

superficial in his preaching. A preacher needs to discover ways to find out what his people need and what they are thinking.

Other regrettable perceptions of expository sermons is that they provide too much detail or give information overkill, while giving little to no structure to the message. This can be illustrated in an email that a church member sent her interim pastor. The names of persons and universities have been changed to protect the innocent, or guilty as it may be:

Good afternoon Dr. *Smith*,

I have greatly enjoyed your pastoral service to our congregation these past few months. As a former academic (over a dozen years teaching communication at *Univ. of Okolona, Smithworth; Lexington State Univ., Sacramento; Communication State Univ.; etc.*) I appreciate the masterful way you combine biblical truth, biblical history, and language to help us better understand God's word to us each week. In addition, your delivery style is conversational and contemporary, showing a great ease of delivery and utilizing many effective strategies to engage your audience (something this former public speaking instructor greatly admires, as well).

However...and you could probably tell "however" was coming <grin>...may I share two insights from my view from the pew?

1. Please consider reducing the quantity of highfalutin words in your sermons. My 25 years of college (9 as a student and the remainder as a faculty member) have prepared me well for nearly every word you have used during your sermons...but today you used a form of a word that, quite frankly, took me by surprise...in fact, I didn't even think the form of the word you used even existed (too bad I can't remember which word it was.)

If I, a well-educated academic, found myself derailed over language usage....well, I suspect that many more others were left behind as well. Feel free to continue using the "proper" words that you'd like to use but consider rephrasing or defining them more simply after each usage...that way you make your content easily accessible to all in attendance. Only some of our congregation have been to graduate school, only some to college, and many with no more than a high school education. I believe adults like to stretch themselves intellectually, but there is a line between being stretched and being left behind. It is the responsibility of the speaker to ensure that he stays on the side of the audience when presenting (whether it be a sermon or a classroom lecture).

2. I find your sermons to be exceptionally strong in terms of observation and interpretation. The only area needing a bit more development is application, i.e.

what can I do? We are challenged by Jesus to act out our faith, not merely intellectualize and understand the history. Offering us suggestions, challenges, ideas or examples of how we can integrate your message into our lives in the week ahead would certainly provide the missing component to otherwise sterling sermons.

Please accept these suggestions in the spirit they are offered: with great love and affection for the gifts God has given you and that you are privileged to share with us each Sunday and with your students at the seminary. I am grateful you have agreed to help us in our transition period and I am grateful for God's leading you to us at Arrogant Baptist Church.

In Christ,

Jane Ann Doe

This author is not suggesting that the accusations made in this email are accurate. As a matter of fact the overtones of arrogance, superiority, and the unmitigated gall of sending such an email to a pastor is nauseating. Having stated the obvious, it is true that the preacher's message needs to be understood by all in attendance and applicable to daily life. One does not need to make the Bible relevant for it is already relevant. The job of the preacher is to uncover the relevance. Preaching that turns churches around is understandable. A preacher who communicates over the heads of his people lacks in wisdom. He obviously has awful aim. The preacher's job is to communicate truth so that people can obey the Word of God. One of the paramount ways to make an oration comprehensible is to use first-rate illustrations. Steve Brown, the instructor on the Key Life Radio Network, once stated, "If you can't illustrate it, don't preach it." The fact that you can exemplify it with an illustration communicates that you have grasped it. For each point formulated in a sermon, tell a story to illustrate the principle. That is how Jesus taught.

The preacher needs to explain the text but he is obligated to illustrate and apply it as well. It would be helpful if the preacher will replace sermons with descriptive outlines with sermons that have outlines that are imperative in nature. Instead of talking about Jonah's failure, Jonah's forgiveness and Jonah's faithfulness, the preacher might want to have the following outline: Acknowledge failure; Accept forgiveness; Act out faithfulness. If the sermon is not applicable it is not preaching. The sermon should answer the question, "So What!"

It is this author's belief that those who disapprove of expository preaching are criticizing poor expository preaching. Expository preaching can be and should be relevant, illustrative, applicable and engaging. This author has found the following outlining method to be accommodating for making the expository sermon attractive. Let us begin with the introduction. Introduce the sermon with the now, the then and the always. The now is a reference to opening the sermon with a narrative, analogy, reference or illustration that will meet the hearer where he or she is in life. Instead of beginning in ancient day Babylon, begin in the present century where the people are so as to gain their interest. Move from the now to the then. The then is a reference to the text of text and its background. This involves reading the scripture and setting the biblical context for the passage. This moves us to the always. The always is the unchanging truth of the scripture that is the proposal statement for the sermon.

Once the preacher concludes the introduction he will move to the main points of the sermon. The main points can be divided into three parts. These three parts are the explanation, illustration and application. As has been stated previously, when it is possible the points themselves should be imperatives rather than descriptive.

The communicator will want to close the message similar to the way he began. He will want to reaffirm the thesis statement or the changeless truth. He also will find it useful to close in the now. In other words he will want to wrap things up with a narrative, analogy, reference or illustration that will meet the hearer where he or she is in life.

Expository preaching is the most beneficial kind of preaching for the preacher as well and the audience. It lifts up Jesus, converts sinners and equips and matures the child of God. This style of proclamation is the most biblical form of preaching and produces more lasting fruit than any other kind. In spite of some opponents to expository preaching, expository preaching is not out dated and is very much relevant to the 21st Century. It is not only an acceptable way to communicate God's word it is the best way.

In light of the fact that this author does not adhere to the regulative principle of worship, it is suggested that there are several means that can be used to illustrate biblical truth. Traditional oral preaching will not fade away as Chris Seay claims yet, the use of current day visual aids can support the Bible communicator to a great extent; whether it is drama, video, or even dance. Being one who has adopted the normative principle of worship, this author believes that there are a number of means to communicate the Gospel in a worship service, as long as they are tasteful and not divergent to scripture. Ed Stetzer and Elmer Towns makes a distinction between meaning and form when it comes to worship.¹²⁵ Meanings have to do with moral and doctrinal issues, while forms have to do with cultural issues. Towns and Stetzer's book is

¹²⁵Elmer Towns and Ed Stetzer, *The Perimeters of Light* (Nashville: Broadman, 2004).

all about how the church is to relate to the culture in order to reach people with the Gospel of Jesus. It is important for the church to stay away from the edge when it comes to moral and doctrinal issues. It is also important that the church get close to the edge when it comes to cultural issues. Just as our missionaries learn the culture before they take the Gospel into a foreign land, the church in America must do the same thing. Methods can and do change but principles never do. The church must be discerning enough to know the difference and make proper adjustments.

Studies show that inadequate preaching is a major contributing factor found in declining churches. Preaching that has life application, pastors that are down to earth and personal, pastors that can communicate, and pastors that can lead with conviction, are important to church health, growth and retention. Preaching must also be strong in doctrine. Even unbelievers are interested in what the church believes about God, Jesus, The Holy Spirit, and the like. Most people are interested in a church that will have some conviction and be bold regarding what they believe. The unchurched and the formerly unchurched seem to have a superior interest in doctrine than long-term Christians. People are not just impressed with the facts of doctrine, but they are impressed with a church that is willing to take a stand. The preacher must not only preach life applicable expository sermons, but he must also preach doctrine with conviction if he is to attract and retain.

When one considers the various elements that contribute to a declining church, it provides some insight into the subjects the pastor needs to consider in his preaching. First of all, not only does the preacher in a declining church need to refuse to shy away from doctrine but he needs to intentionally address doctrine with boldness. It

appears that a great number of people are attracted to a church, pastor, person or organization that has strong convictions and is up front about what they believe.

The pastor in the declining church also needs to preach on the importance of being friendly, winsome and personable. Congregation members need to be friendly with every person no matter how they look or what their background may be. It may be that the church that sees herself as friendly is only friendly with one another. The pastor needs to preach the importance of loving all kinds of people. He could preach on the Good Samaritan and make appropriate application. Another appropriate passage could be how we are one in Christ found in Galatians 3:28 or Galatians 2:11-21 that considers Peter's hypocrisy of not receiving Gentiles when his Jewish friends were present. This author has also found James 2:1-13 helpful in communicating the importance of reaching out to all kinds of people. To show oneself friendly to those who are different takes a great deal of humility, considering the fact that all are desperate and equally separated from God without Christ.

Another subject the pastor in a declining church needs to give attention to is the responsibility of every member (Christian) being a witness. A few texts the pastor could preach are Mathew 28:18-20, Acts 1:8, and Romans 1:13-17. Too often Christians suppose that the pastor is the one who has been hired to reach the lost. The Scripture plainly shows that the pastor is the equipper of the people so that the people can do the work of ministry. Ephesians 4:11-12 states, "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." This would certainly be an important text to include into the pastors preaching plan. This author

communicates to his congregation, “As the pastor it is not my job to do ministry. As a pastor it is my job to equip you to do ministry. As a Christian it is my job to do ministry.” The pastor must preach that evangelism is the responsibility of every Christian.

It is also important for the pastor to preach on worship and the atmosphere of the church. It has been the experience of this author that people are attracted to a fervent, passionate, unified, loving and celebrative atmosphere. People are not attracted to a stiff, formal and inauthentic church or atmosphere. Too many people walk into a worship service and find it stale, ritualistic and uninspiring. A worship service should not only inform, but it should also inspire. If a church is to have this type of atmosphere it must begin in the Pulpit. The pastor must lead the way by preaching and casting vision for this type of worship and atmosphere. This author is the pastor of Little Flock Baptist Church in Shepherdsville, Kentucky. This church does a great job when it comes to creating a celebrative atmosphere for worship. Little Flock is passionate about worship. Engaging and participatory worship is a priority for each week. Energetic music, freedom of worship, and musical excellence lead believers to transformational moments that have a lasting impact as we connect with God and are led to His throne. In II Chronicles 5, Solomon’s Temple was dedicated. The music was a celebration with trumpets, instruments and singers that glorified the Lord, singing, ‘He indeed is good for His lovingkindness is everlasting.’ It is imperative that this be addressed from the pulpit.

Participating in small groups is another area that the preacher needs to put an emphasis on. It is the meaningful worship service that often times brings people into the front door of the church and gets them to come back the second and third time. Yet,

if people are to be retained they need to be involved in Sunday School or some other small group. In the small group people will become connected to other people and this will help keep them involved and committed. The preacher might want to preach on subjects such as accountability to encourage people to be involved in a small group. It is necessary to stress to the congregation, on a regular basis, how important it is to be involved in a small group. Acts 2:40-47 is a viable passage to preach from to convince parishioners of the vital importance of small group involvement.

The preaching of the Bible has become less than important with certain Christian groups. The preaching of the Word is sometimes replaced with praise and worship services, where there is minute to no preaching, just singing. Even though a song service may be appropriate on an occasional basis, it is important for the worship service to have a stable diet of Biblical preaching and instruction. When it comes to preaching that advances a church, it is imperative to instill the importance of preaching in our people, preach using lots of scripture, and balance strong stands with God's unmerited favor.

The ministry of proclamation is to be held in an elevated position as an indispensable ministry of the church. One merely needs to take a glimpse throughout the Bible to realize its magnitude. Jesus was a preacher. He said that He must proclaim the good news because that's why He was deployed (Luke 4:43). Two added Biblical personalities who were preachers that put a bundle of weight on preaching were John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul. As a matter of fact the Apostle Paul was not excessively concerned with the motives of certain preachers, he was just cheerful that Christ was being preached. In Philippians 1:18 Paul states, "But what does it matter? The important

thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice” (NIV).

Not only is the style, content and proper organization of the sermon important, but the demeanor of the preacher proves to be valuable as well. Preaching that connects is transparent preaching. It is essential for people to know that the preacher is a human being and can identify with what they experience in life. He understands their difficulties since he has comparable ones. This is not to say that the preacher should air all his soiled laundry, but it is vital that those he speaks to know he is authentic and has feet of clay. In a day when there has been so much scandal in the church, it is imperative the church leaders be and look authentic if they are to be believable to a skeptical world. One can show his legitimacy by publicly apologizing and acknowledging when he is wrong. If the preacher is to be authentic he must be able to laugh at himself and share stories that are self-effacing. The preacher should learn to take God and His word serious while at the same time refusing to take himself too serious. If the preacher is not authentic, it may be that those listening to him won't believe that Christ is authentic. When this author recently had a church member tell him that her family enjoys coming to her church because the preacher is a real guy, that confirmed the need for being real. They said that he is not like a preacher, he's like a real person. As the preacher, this author took that comment as a great compliment. On another occasion this author also had a deacon tell him that because of his transparency and openness people feel relaxed talking to him about anything without the fear of being damned. If the preacher will be transparent in his preaching he will open himself up to minister to more people.

Not only does the Scripture communicate that preaching is to be primary, but practically speaking, the data shows that when preaching is chief the church experiences conversion growth. Some may suppose that other techniques are essential in order to attain the lost. While other methods can be useful the most successful method is strong Biblical preaching. If there is anything that a dilapidated church needs it is a well arranged, applicable, relevant, and potent pulpit ministry. Research demonstrates that nothing can take the place of a strong preaching ministry. Some incorrectly believe that in order to be evangelistic, a church needs to put its focus on event evangelism and seeker services.

While the needs of waning churches may differ depending on a particular church and her needs, it is certain that the most important need of a declining church is preaching. Preaching should not and can not be overvalued. Preaching can be the device that God employs to address the other needs a particular church may have. As the Word of God is preached, addressing the various needs of the church, God will use His Word to change hearts and the course of people's lives. When people's hearts and lives are transformed they will persevere and reach out and the church will cease to decline.

The pastor of a declining church should evaluate and identify the church's needs. After determining the church's needs, choose passages or books of the Bible that relate to those needs. Preach those passages or that book with relevant application and contemporary illustrations. Preach it with passion and pray that the Holy Spirit would anoint him from on high.

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