



A MINISTRY TOOLKIT FOR PASTORS

PASTORAL CARE PASSAGES, WEDDING
AND FUNERAL OUTLINES, AND MINISTRY
HELPS FROM EXPERIENCED PASTORS
AND CHURCH LEADERS

A Ministry Toolkit for Pastors: Pastoral Care Passages, Wedding and Funeral Outlines, and Ministry Helps from Experienced Pastors and Church Leaders

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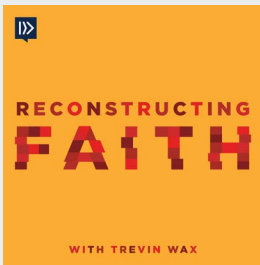
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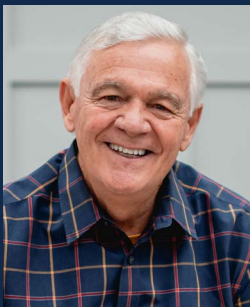
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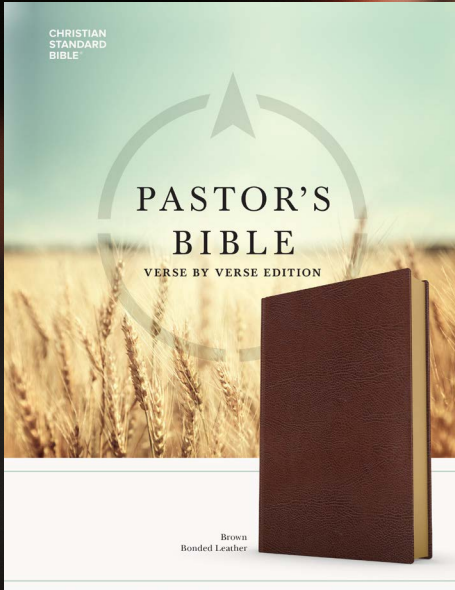
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91 SECTION

PASSAGES ON PASTORAL CARE

Where to Turn

When you are blue	Psalm 42:5
When tempted to do wrong	Matthew 4:1-11
When you face physical danger	Acts 27:13-26
When you are discouraged	2 Corinthians 1:3-11
When you are bored	Psalm 103
When nothing seems to be going right	Psalm 37:1-4
When you worry about having enough of life's necessities	Psalm 37:25-26
When you are afraid	Psalm 27
When you are lonely	Psalm 13
When you are anxious for those you love	Psalm 107
When you sin	1 John 1:9
When you need forgiveness	Psalm 51
When you need restoration	Luke 15:11-24
When you are feeling shame	Proverbs 28:13
When you feel no one understands	Hebrews 4:14-16
When you are tempted to be stingy	Proverbs 11:25
When you plan your budget	2 Corinthians 9:6-9
When you have to leave home	Psalm 121
When you are tired	Psalm 127:1-2
When friends seem to turn on you	Psalm 55
When you lose a loved one	1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
When you are afraid of death	Psalm 23
When you want to take revenge	Romans 12:19
When God seems far away	Psalm 139
When you have failed God	2 Timothy 2:13
When you feel abandoned	Hebrews 13:5
When you need more than human help	Psalm 46
When your past haunts you	Colossians 1:21-22
When you feel confused	Philippians 4:8
When you think you are the only one being tempted	1 Corinthians 10:13
When you need to know how to stay on the right path	Psalm 119:9-11
When temptation seems stronger than you are	Ephesians 6:10-18
When the devil comes after you	James 4:7
When you are sick	James 5:14
When you feel weak	2 Corinthians 12:9
When you experience trouble	2 Corinthians 1:3-11
When you have left God	Luke 15:11-32
When you're feeling bitter	Hebrews 12:15
When someone has wronged you	Colossians 3:13
When you are anxious	Luke 12:22-34
When you need guidance	Proverbs 3:5-6
When you feel sorry for yourself	Psalm 102

Where to Turn

When you are jealous of others' success	Proverbs 14:30
When you doubt that God wants to hear from you	Luke 18:1-8
When you need to know the ABCs of prayer	Luke 11:1-4
When you feel like giving up	Luke 11:5-13
When your faith feels insufficient	Mark 9:14-24
When you fear failure	Psalms 37:23-24
When you experience a power shortage	Ephesians 1:19-20
When your hopes are dashed	Psalms 34:18
When trouble comes in wave after wave	James 1:2-4
When you doubt your worth	Psalms 139:13-18
When reading the Scripture seems dull	1 Thessalonians 2:13
When people misread your intentions	Matthew 5:11-12
When you are prideful	Romans 12:3
When you doubt that God is able	Ephesians 3:20
When you are angry	Ephesians 4:26-27
When you see evil people prosper	Psalms 37:1-3
When you are tempted to look out only for #1	Luke 12:13-21
When you carry a heavy load	Matthew 11:28-30
When you need direction	Psalms 25:9
When you worry	Matthew 6:34
When selfishness gets you in its grip	Matthew 16:25
When you suffer for doing right	1 Peter 1:6-7
When you doubt that God loves you	John 3:16
When you think that God owes you mercy	Romans 2:4
When the evil in the world seems overwhelming	Romans 8:28
When evil seems greater than God	Revelation 19:6
When you don't feel at peace with God	Romans 5:1-5
When someone has harmed you	Matthew 6:14-15
When God seems to delay	John 11:1-44
When you need wisdom	James 1:5-8
When you are tempted to look down on others	Matthew 7:1-6
When there are troubles with your wife	Ephesians 5:25-30
When there are troubles with your husband	Ephesians 5:22-24
When you are tempted to commit sexual sins	1 Corinthians 6:18-20
When God does not seem to act	Luke 24:13-35
When you seek assurance of God's purpose for you	Psalms 138:7-8

02 SECTION

WEDDING AND FUNERAL
OUTLINES

THE PROCESSIONAL

THE WELCOME

Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the presence of this company, to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which is commended by the Apostle Paul to be honorable among all men; therefore, it is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, and in the fear of God. Into this holy estate, these two persons come now to be joined. (The following statement is optional: If any man can show just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else, hereafter, forever hold his peace.)

THE CHARGE

(Groom), wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, and keep her, in sickness and in health; and forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as you both shall live?

Groom responds: "I will."

(Bride), wilt thou have this man to be thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love him, comfort him, and keep him, in sickness and in health; and forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as you both shall live?

Bride responds: "I will."

THE GIVING OF THE BRIDE

Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?

Father responds: "I do," "We do," or, "Her mother and I do." (The father is then seated.)

THE STATEMENT OF MARRIAGE

(Groom) and (bride), as part of your marriage ceremony, you have chosen to use what has been known as "the traditional wedding vows." They can be traced back to the 1300s in England, yet they have remained, perhaps, the most loved and best known of all ceremonies. In these moments, before you take your vows, let's go further back than the 1300s. Let's travel back in time to the first wedding and look at that original match. We will seek the answer to the question some people ask, "Why do people get married?" God answers that for us in his Word.

As we examine the creation events in the first chapter of Genesis, we discover the triune God saying, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the

fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth.’ So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female” (Gn 1:26-27). God created male and female and joined them together as a *demonstration* of himself. When a couple is united in the oneness of marriage, God is glorified, and the divine image of the heavenly Father is reflected on earth.

The creation account tells us more about the importance of the union of man and woman. We know that marriage is important because it was God’s plan for the elevation of a new kind of creation, one that was superior to all else God had created. God told man to rule over his magnificent creation: “Fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth” (Gn 1:28).

As we examine the second chapter of Genesis, we find that God made marriage as the *completion* of his supreme creature, man. Adam lived in a perfect environment and had a fascinating creation to observe, but still something was missing. God, ever sensitive to his creature’s needs, said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper corresponding to him” (Gn 2:18). Was God successful? The first recorded words of Adam are: “This one, at last, is bone of my bone” (Gn 2:23a). The Living Bible paraphrases his words as: “This is it!” Adam finally knew the satisfaction of being complete.

In the Academy Award-winning movie *Rocky*, the boxing champion had a love relationship with a woman named Adrian. Her brother, Pauly, couldn’t understand it. “I don’t see it,” he said. “What’s the attraction?” To which Rocky responded, “I don’t know . . . fills gaps, I guess.” Pauly asked, “What gaps?” “She’s got gaps; I got gaps,” Rocky explained. “Together we fill gaps.”

Another reason we marry may be discovered in Genesis. We read that God made marriage for the *reproduction* of a godly heritage. “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful, multiply’” (1:28). Godly children are a gift from God. “Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, offspring, a reward” (Ps 127:3). Marriage, simply defined, is the contemplation of the love of God in and through the form of other human beings—the spouse and the child.

Believing that you understand something of the reason for marriage as God has revealed it, are you ready now to confirm your commitment to God and to each other in Christian marriage?

Couple responds: “We are.”

THE VOWS

(Groom) and (bride), join hands and repeat after me:

Groom: “I, (groom), take thee, (bride), to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health; to love and

A CLASSICAL WEDDING CEREMONY

to cherish, till death do us part; according to God's holy ordinance; and, thereto, I plight (or pledge) thee my troth."

Bride: "I, (bride), take thee, (groom), to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health; to love, to cherish, and to obey till death do us part; according to God's holy ordinance; and, thereto, I plight (or pledge) thee my troth."

THE EXCHANGE OF RINGS

(Groom), is there a ring?

Groom responds: "Yes."

(The minister takes the ring from the best man or ring bearer and places it in the groom's hand. The groom will then place the ring on the third finger of the bride's left hand. The groom, still holding the ring in place, repeats the following vow.)

(Groom), repeat after me:

Groom: "With this ring I thee wed, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

(Bride), is there a ring?

Bride responds: "Yes."

(The minister takes the ring from the maid or matron of honor and places it in the bride's hand. The bride will then place the ring on the third finger of the groom's left hand. The bride, still holding the ring in place, repeats the following vow.)

(Bride), repeat after me:

Bride: "With this ring I thee wed, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Congregation, please join us in praying our Lord's Prayer: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever" (Mt 6:9-13, modified KJV).

(Minister continues praying): O Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all mankind, Giver of all spiritual grace, the Author of everlasting life, send thy blessing upon these, thy servants,

A CLASSICAL WEDDING CEREMONY

(Groom) and (bride), whom we bless in thy name. May they live faithfully together as husband and wife, and keep the solemn vows made between them, which are symbolized by the rings given and received. May this couple ever remain in perfect love and peace together, and live according to thy laws. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

THE PRONOUNCEMENT

Forasmuch as (groom) and (bride) have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and, hereto, have given and pledged their troth, each to the other, and have declared the same by giving and receiving rings, and by joining hands, I pronounce that they are husband and wife. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

THE BENEDICTION

(Groom) and (bride), "The Lord bless you and protect you; the Lord make his face shine on you, and be gracious to you; the Lord look with favor on you and give you peace" (Nm 6:24-26 KJV). Amen.

THE PRESENTATION

(Groom), you may kiss your wife. I am pleased to announce for the first time, "These are Mr. and Mrs. ____." "What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mt 19:6 KJV).

THE RECESSIONAL

THE PRELUDE

THE SEATING OF THE MOTHERS

(Before the groom's mother is seated, she and the groom's father will light the groom's individual unity candle. Likewise, before the bride's mother is seated, she and the bride's father will light the bride's individual unity candle.)

THE PROCESSIONAL

THE WELCOME

Dear family and friends, we are gathered here today in the sight of God and in the presence of this company to witness the union of (groom) and (bride) in Christian marriage. Marriage is a holy estate given by God to fulfill us as individuals and as a couple, and to conform us, as maturing believers, into the image of Christ. (groom) and (bride) have chosen to be married in the Lord's house as a testimony of their faith in God and as a witness to all present that they desire to honor their Lord and Savior in their lives and in their home. May our heavenly Father look down upon this event with his favor. May the Lord Jesus Christ be present and add his blessing. May the Holy Spirit attend and seal these vows in love.

THE GIVING IN MARRIAGE

In God's most amazing act of creation, he created beings in his own image. They not only were made to reflect his image, but they were made in his image. We read of this astonishing event in the first chapter of Genesis: "So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female" (v. 27). Being made in the image of the triune God, the male was not complete when he was alone, so God created the perfect complement for the male: the female. She was to be his life companion, his co-laborer in fulfilling the creation mandate of God: "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth" (v. 28).

In the time of man's innocence, God instituted the estate of matrimony between the first man and the first woman. Marriage was consecrated by God, not only for mutual help and comfort, but also as a means of procreation. In marriage, God gave his creatures, man and woman, the ability—and the mandate—to create life like themselves, life in the image of God. Not only this, but God also gave this first couple a taste of redemption for mankind, as marriage is a foretaste of the mystical union that exists between Christ and his bride, the church.

It is into this holy estate that (groom) and (bride) have chosen to enter. Not knowing any just reason that these two should not be married, I ask, "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?"

Father responds: "Her mother and I do."

(Alternate: *Father and mother respond: "We do."*)

THE INVOCATION

Let us pray: Father, Creator, we thank you for your wondrous and gracious creation of mankind in your image. We thank you for the heavenly character of love—especially when your love exists between a man and a woman. We thank you for your institution of marriage and of the joy and the sense of completion that it brings. We thank you for our redemption in Jesus Christ, as we are made new creatures in him. We ask now that you bless the union of (groom) and (bride), that they may grow to conform to the image of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We ask you to enable this couple to bless you in their lives and in their marriage in all the days ahead. For it is in your name alone that we pray. Amen.

THE STATEMENT OF MARRIAGE

(Groom) and (bride), you are about to pledge the most sacred vows that one person makes with another. As you stand before the witness of God and this company, it is important that you give careful consideration to that which you are promising. You are accountable to your precious mate and to God for that which you pledge. It is advisable that you soberly examine the vows you are about to make.

These vows, which you have selected to represent your commitment, are timeless in the earnest promises they reflect. In these few moments, we will examine the things that you are vowing to do for your mate, regardless of life's circumstances, for as long as you live.

Your first promise is to *honor your mate*. What does "to honor" mean? As Christians, we look to God's Word for instruction on this and other important matters. In doing so, we find that honor is a biblical term for respect, esteem, high regard, and reward. In its various forms, it is found more than 222 times in the English Bible. Honor is used to represent respect paid to superiors, such as God, Christ, kings and presidents, church officers, the elderly, and parents. Honor can also be something bestowed as a reward for virtuous behavior, such as for honoring God or serving Christ, for manifesting wisdom, discipline, or righteousness.

To honor someone or something is to acknowledge and show respect for the authority or worthiness of the object of one's honor. This is the connotation of "to honor" one's mate. As you make your vows to each other, you are pledging to acknowledge and to show respect for the worthiness of your mate. Showing honor to your mate involves an affective side (that is, a feeling of respect for your mate) as well as outward manifestations (that is, your actions toward or regarding your mate). Tragically, there are too few marriage partners who consistently keep this vow. This lack of honoring one's mate contributes significantly to troubled and failed marriages. Too often marriage partners fail to realize the value and worthiness of the one they profess to love above all others. Instead, they tend to elevate themselves or others to the demotion of their mate.

There is one other aspect of honoring your mate about which you should be aware. In the Bible the word *love* is sometimes used as a synonym for *honor*. This is seen when Paul tells the Romans, "Love one another deeply as brothers and sisters. Outdo one another in showing honor" (Rm 12:10). (Groom) and (bride), if you truly love each other, you will desire to honor each other. We see also in Scripture the highest example of such honor. It is the example of Christ. In washing the disciples' feet, he paid them the honor of service, of subjecting his own priorities to their interests. (Groom) and (bride), do you really love each other enough to honor each other as Christ would have you do? Are you prepared to follow Christ's example by subjecting your personal priorities to the other's best interest and serving the other all the days of your life?

Next, you will promise to *love and to cherish your mate*. For two people like you, who are so deeply in love, these promises sound easy enough to keep. Yet there are many who start out "in love" when they marry, but who apparently no longer "cherish" their mate enough to stay married for a lifetime. We hear the statistics; we see the marital casualties of our day. Do not despair, however; you can build a stable and loving relationship that will withstand the storms of life. How is that possible?

You must look to your heavenly Father, not only for his wise counsel on marriage, but also for his being a role model of loving and cherishing this new family member. God's Word, in 1 John, describes his role modeling: "See what great love the Father has given us that we should be called God's children—and we are!" (3:1). It is amazing that God Almighty chose to adopt us as his children—not his servants—his family members! This lavish love is unconditional and blind to sinful shortcomings. As you are about to "adopt" this new family member, your mate, remember to lavish on your mate godly, unconditional love. This is much more than simply saying the words, *I love you*, every day. First John continues by saying, "Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth; . . . Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, . . . And we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and the one who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him." (3:18; 4:7a,16).

These verses explain to us that God is not only the source of love; he is love. If you are to live all your married days "in love," then you must do as the verse says: "The one who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him" (4:16c). It cannot be with just your words or even your well-intentioned vows that you proclaim your love to and for your mate. Your words must be clothed in action, day after day, from the little things to the big things of life. This involves a total commitment of your life—to live in God and allowing God to live in you—so that your relationship to him and to your mate reflects his love. This means your focus cannot be on attaining the perfect house or the great job but rather, on maintaining the humble posture of a loving servant who is willing to serve his God and serve his mate . . . for life! Then—and only then—can you begin to understand what to *cherish* means.

In this insightful book of the Bible, we find: "This is how we have come to know love: He laid down his life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our [mate]" (1Jn 3:16, paraphrased). (Groom) and (bride), you must lay down your lives—your selfish desires, passions, ambition, and pride—for each other. You must cherish the other more than you cherish your

own self. Your mate now comes first—before yourself, before your parents, before your friends, before your job, before your leisure activities, before your caring for your own exhaustion and needs at the end of a hard day. You must serve each other as Christ served. Then and only then will you truly fulfill your vow “to love and to cherish.” And all of this wonderfully ties into honoring your mate.

THE VOWS

(Groom) and (bride), you have listened to this sobering explanation of the meaning of the vows you are about to make. These vows are as binding in adversity as they are in prosperity. They should be broken only by death. If you are prepared to make such a serious commitment, will you now turn, face one another, and join hands.

(Groom), in taking (bride) to be your wife, do you so promise to honor, to love, and to cherish her in sickness as in health, in poverty as in wealth, in hardship as in blessing, until death alone shall part you?

Groom responds: “I do.”

(Bride), in taking (groom) to be your husband, do you so promise to honor, to love, and to cherish him in sickness as in health, in poverty as in wealth, in hardship as in blessing, until death alone shall part you?

Bride responds: “I do.”

THE EXCHANGE OF RINGS

You will now seal your vows, “to honor, to love, to cherish,” by the giving and receiving of rings. The unbroken circles of these rings symbolize a union between husband and wife with God that cannot be broken. This is in accord with God’s creation plan, and it brings honor to the One who created you to glorify him. The precious glistening gold of these rings symbolizes all that is pure and holy in the marital bond. As these metals were refined to fashion these beautiful rings, may God ever refine and purify you both as new creations in Christ Jesus. As you wear these rings, may they ever remind you of your love and of the commitment you have made this day.

(Groom), place this ring on (bride’s) finger and repeat after me:

Groom: “I, (groom), take you, (bride), to be my wedded wife to have and to hold, from this day forward. I pledge before God and these witnesses to place your good above mine, now and always, no matter the circumstances. I promise to honor you, to love you, and to cherish you until death do us part. Joyfully and willingly, I commit myself to you, and to you alone.”

(Bride), place this ring on (groom’s) finger and repeat after me:

Bride: "I, (bride), take you, (groom), to be my wedded husband to have and to hold, from this day forward. I pledge before God and these witnesses to place your good above mine, now and always, no matter the circumstances. I promise to honor you, to love you, and to cherish you until death do us part. Joyfully and willingly, I commit myself to you, and to you alone."

THE SONG

(Song to be sung as the bride and groom kneel in prayer.)

THE PRAYER

(The bride and groom will continue kneeling in prayer.)

Gracious Father, thank you for creating us in your image. Because of this, we are able to know you and to know what true love is. We see in this couple a deep and abiding love for each other and for you. We have witnessed the giving of vows and rings in this sacred hour. Through your power and blessing, we ask you to enable these two to keep their vows, to be renewed daily in their love and commitment, to walk in mutual faith, to build a strong and lasting marriage, and to live by confidence in your grace. As they grow in conformity to Christ's image, may you, O Lord, receive glory through the lives and marriage of _ (groom) and _ (bride). In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

(The bride and groom will stand.)

THE LIGHTING OF THE UNITY CANDLE

(Groom) and (bride), your parents have lighted a separate candle for each of you. They did so to symbolize your individual lives and the families from which you come. Your individual lives have been a blessing to your parents who have received immeasurable joy in seeing you grow and mature over the years. Your individual lives have been a blessing to those who have known and loved you. Your individual lives have been a blessing to God whom you have faithfully served.

As you lift your individual candles from their holders, be reminded that marriage does not eliminate your separate identities. You are made in the image of your heavenly Father; nevertheless, you are each unique. God has created you as such for his purpose and his glory. You will not extinguish your individual candles, as God still has much to do in and through your individual lives. Together you will light the unity candle to symbolize your union in marriage. Together you assume a new identity—as one with each other and the Lord. Today, God has created anew in you a union that will enable you to fulfill his creation mandate to serve him in the world and to establish a family.

THE SONG

(Song to be played or sung during the lighting of the unity candle.)

THE DECLARATION OF MARRIAGE

(Groom) and (bride), we have witnessed the pledging of your love and commitment to each other. We have seen the sealing of your solemn vows of marriage by the giving and receiving of rings. It is, therefore, my joy and privilege to declare you husband and wife. (Groom), you may kiss your bride.

THE INTRODUCTION OF THE NEWLYWEDS

Friends and family of the bride and groom, it is my pleasure to present to you Mr. and Mrs.
_____.

THE RECESSIONAL

THE POSTLUDE

The following are practical pointers that have served me well in rural, suburban, and urban settings.

Tip #1: What to Do on Receiving Notification of Death

- See the family as soon as possible at the home, hospital, or emergency room.
 - Pray with them.
 - Listen to them.
 - Lend your shoulder.

Don't use such phrases as, "It must be the will of God," "God needed another angel," etc. They're not ready for that. Remember: Your presence is what counts.

- Seek a family member or close family friend with whom you can talk. Find someone who is not so emotionally distraught.
 - Begin discussing some preliminary planning for the next steps that must be taken.
 - Schedule to go back in the next day or two to plan the memorial service. If possible, see them again before they go to the funeral home.

Sometimes you may be asked to assist in the selection of a casket, a burial place, even clothes for the deceased. Be helpful when asked, but do not take over.

Personal note: I try to steer the families away from high-priced accessories that family members often have a tendency to prefer because of their desire to honor their deceased loved ones. Some people have the resources to handle this, but many do not. They can be burdened with debt long into the future, and we can help them by encouraging more moderate costs.

Tip #2: What to Do When Visiting in the Home

- Ask about the desired place and time for the service:
 - Church, funeral home, or graveside?
 - If they are faithful church members, I encourage the use of the church facilities—a place of warmth, familiarity, memories, and a major part of their lives.
- Ask about the type of service:
 - Memorial if cremation or funeral if body present?
- Ask who will officiate:
 - Pastor, former pastor, staff member, family member, or a friend who is a minister?
- Ask what type of music is preferred.
 - Live, piped-in, CDs, etc.?
 - Hymns, praise songs, favorites?
 - Choir, ensembles, solos, organ, piano, or other music?

Keep in mind the family members who remain, for the loved one is in glory.

- See the family as soon as possible at the home, hospital, or emergency room.
 - Pray with them.
 - Listen to them.
 - Lend your shoulder.

Don't use such phrases as, "It must be the will of God," "God needed another angel," etc. They're not ready for that. Remember: Your presence is what counts.

- Ask about favorite Scriptures:
 - Family preferences, life passages, or favorite verses of the deceased?

Often I have used the deceased's Bible from which to read. This is most appreciated by the family.

- Ask about any eulogy.
 - Pastor can deliver one he has written (if he knows the deceased well) or read one the family has composed.
 - Extended family members and friends can also do this.

Sometimes more than one eulogy is used. If so, be sure to have the participants write the eulogies. This will guard the time as well as help them if they should be overcome with emotion. It also keeps people from rambling.

- Ask the family if they want a visitation:
 - Night before? Afternoon? Prior to the service? None?

- Where will the committal be?

- Cremation or ground burial?

- Do they want ashes to be scattered or kept?

- Will there be a military salute, service, or club recognition?

- Ask about the people they prefer for active pallbearers.
 - Family, friends, or both?
 - Honorary pallbearers?

The funeral director will also assist in this.

- Try to be there with the immediate family as much as possible when planning the service.

Tip #3: What to Do When Scheduling the Service

- Be sure space is available and the church calendar is checked.
- Times must be very clear.
- Contact musicians.
- If necessary, check with technical assistants for lighting, sound, recording, or videotaping.
- Prepare the order of service for musicians, technical crew, and funeral directors.
- Look at a time frame of thirty-five minutes to one hour for most services.

Tip #4: What to Do During the Funeral Home Visit

- Try to visit with the family during the scheduled funeral home visitation.
 - If possible, meet with the family for a few minutes prior to their viewing the body for the first time.

This is a very emotional time for the family as the reality of death sinks in even more deeply. This is especially important if a widow or widower and the deceased do not have extended family or strong church support.

- At some point, you must address whether the family wants to close the casket before or after the service. I usually encourage the family to do so before the service. If the casket is left open during the service—or closed and then reopened—this brings a fresh outpouring of grief, and the worship service’s message of encouragement and faith may not come across. *I encourage the family—as the funeral director probably will—to remove rings, necklaces, jewelry, teddy bears, etc., from the casket. These can be kept in the family and preserved as cherished keepsakes or heirlooms.*
- Seek to give guidance about designating gifts as memorials to the church or a favorite charity or ministry. This provides a living legacy for the deceased.

Tip #5: What to Do During the Service

- Meet the family in a side room in the church or funeral home for prayer and encouragement. I usually tell them how much their loved one meant to me, outline the procedure for the service, join hands with family members, and pray with them.
- Precede the family into the service, have the audience rise until the family has been seated, and then ask everyone to be seated.
- Welcome everyone to the service. Remind them that the purpose of our gathering is to honor Christ and the loved one who has died, as well as to encourage the family.
- Following this is a good place to read the obituary notes of birthplace and date, names of family members, etc., before proceeding with the planned service.

Tip #6: What to Do When Concluding the Service

- Give clear direction about plans for immediately after dismissal.
 - Does the family want one last private time with the body?
 - Will there be a reception? If so, where?

Some families are now having a private burial, then proceeding to a public memorial service, and afterwards hosting a reception at the church or in their home. If going immediately to the cemetery, inform the people of that and of how to form into the processional line.

- Walk in front of the casket as it is carried out of the church or funeral home. Stand at reverent attention while the casket is placed in the hearse.

- The funeral director will have your car in the proper place for the procession or will inform you where he wants you to be. This is usually just behind the hearse so that on arrival you can be ready to assist the pallbearers as they take the body to the place of interment.

Tip #7: What to Do at the Graveside

- Walk before the casket to the appointed place.
- Stand where the head of the casket is to rest.
- Wait until everyone is in place before beginning.
- Speak loudly as being outside absorbs sound quickly.
Sometimes the family will desire that a chorus of a familiar hymn or praise song be sung. You or someone else can lead this.
- Keep the graveside ceremony short. A passage of Scripture on the resurrection and/or the second coming is always appropriate. Pray a brief prayer of committal.
- If other additions to the graveside ceremony—such as military, lodge, or club—are planned, you may want them to go first.
- After the closing prayer, shake hands with the immediate family and then step aside.
- The funeral director will usually conclude the service by directing the pallbearers to place the flowers on the casket.
Sometimes, the family wants to stay in place for the covering of the grave. I do not recommend this, but that is a family choice.

Teachers play an important part in the human experience. All people in one way or another, for better or worse, are affected by the teachers in their lives. Some of these mentors are parents. Some are in our school systems. Some are brothers and sisters. Some are classmates. Some are found in the church. Some are those encountered at the office. Some are lecturers or seminar gurus. They impact our lives from the cradle to the grave.

There is one teacher that we do not like to listen to. But this teacher raises our awareness about one of life's most important mysteries and realities. The teacher's calling card is marked death. It is said that a mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires. The death of a loved one becomes a teachable moment. Let's listen while God's Word speaks to us about death: "And just as it is appointed for people to die once—and after this, judgment" (Heb 9:27).

I. REALITY

First, we are reminded of the reality of death. Our text speaks briefly but clearly. Everyone is going to die. More than one person is dying every second—four thousand an hour, ninety-six thousand a day, more than thirty-five million a year. Some people refuse to think about death. Some are nonchalant about it. Others live in fear of it. And some deal with it through the eyes of Christian faith. It comes down every highway, across every sky. Saint and sinner, rich and poor experience it. It is no respecter of persons.

II. REASON

The logical question is, Why does death exist? What is the reason for death? The Scriptures tell us that death entered the planet of earth when the first man and woman rebelled in disobedience to God's clear command. He had instructed Adam and Eve, "But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day you eat from it, you will certainly die" (Gn 2:17).

Man did what God forbade. Death—an intruder, an alien to God's desire for mankind's good—came. Since Adam represented the human race, all humanity inherited his tragic death genes. It may not seem fair, but it's like a football team being penalized for the error of one player. One man costs the whole team. God must keep his Word.

III. REALM

When you consider death, you must look at the realm of death. The separation of the soul from the body is far more than physical. It is also spiritual—the alienation of the spirit from God—and it is eternal. Physical death awaits every human. Spiritual and eternal death are for all who are outside the grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ: "For the wages of sin is death" (Rm 6:23). It is a terrible payday, but a very real one.

IV. READINESS

Facing these realities, it is crucial for every person to make the proper plans for this journey. The more significant the journey, the more thorough our preparations. There must be a readiness for death. The psalmist underscored it when he wrote, "Teach us to number our days carefully so that we may develop wisdom in our hearts" (Ps 90:12).

How can we do it? First, we can think about death honestly. Contemplate the reality that we will not always be in this world. Parents should help their children to develop a philosophy of life and death. This can be done in progressive steps as they mature. Adults should have some things settled about death. For example, have you made your will? If you don't, the state will do it for you. And your hard-earned assets could be dispersed away from those people, the church, and philanthropic ministries you love most. What about your place of burial, as well as the type and setting for your memorial service?

Second, death teaches us to make time count. "There is an occasion for everything, and a time for every activity under heaven" (Ec 3:1).

Third, death teaches us about eternal values. What is important in life? Some years ago a college football team won a hard-fought bowl game. The fans and team were ecstatic over the big victory. During the celebration in the locker room, word came that the head coach's father, a spectator at the game, was fatally stricken with a heart attack. Suddenly, the atmosphere changed. Tears, silence, and sadness filled the room that only moments before had been alive with happiness. A player speaking to the press remarked that victory in the football game seemed insignificant in the light of the death of the coach's father.

Fourth, death instructs us about the significance of relationships. Never take for granted a spouse, a child, a grandchild, a cherished friend or colleague, a parent or grandparent. People are at the heart of who we are. Cherish every shared experience, the memories of special occasions. Make new memories. Write notes of love and gratitude. Give something you value to someone you value.

Don't be afraid to say, "I love you." A bereaved husband, in reflecting on the sudden death of his wife, said that the thing hardest for him to deal with was remembering hearing her say, "I love you," and kissing him as he went off to work.

Keep short accounts with disagreements and anger. Be quick to say "I'm sorry" and "Forgive me." Mend broken fences. Seek to live in your relationships so that regret will not be your companion in years ahead.

Fifth, death underscores the most important preparation of all, preparing to go into eternity to face God. The Old Testament writer Amos said it in one terse sentence: "Prepare to meet your God!" (Am 4:12).

Our New Testament text repeats it: “After this [death], judgment” (Heb 9:27). There is only one way to be prepared for death. And that is to place faith in the only one who conquered death: Jesus Christ. “For the wages of sin is death, [and here is the great, good news] but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rm 6:23).

There is no better time than right now to settle your eternal destiny and to receive Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and Lord. It is simple: “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rm 10:13).

In a line that never seems to end, a remnant of faithful communists stand in respectful silence in the winter winds at Red Square in Moscow, waiting to enter the mausoleum of Nikolai Vladimir Lenin, the revered patriarch of Russian communism. They have come to view a dead body. But there is no thought that Lenin lives and is not there.

In the center of a public cemetery in Springfield, Illinois, rises an obelisk. It sits atop an appropriately modest private mausoleum. On the wall surrounding the monument are the seals of the states of the Union. Under the floor is buried all that is mortal of President Abraham Lincoln. Visitors read the famous statement of Edwin Stanton, “Now he belongs to the ages.” They come to pay homage to the man who preserved the Union. But there is no thought that Lincoln lives and is not there.

In Paris, France, a giant sarcophagus sits under the gilded domes of Les Invalides, a military hospital. Within that tomb rest the mortal remains of Napoleon Bonaparte. Tourists gaze in awe at the gigantic tomb of the great emperor. But there is no thought that Napoleon lives and is not there.

But when pilgrims go to the tomb of the Lord Jesus Christ outside the walls of Jerusalem, they are visiting a place that is no longer occupied. The very meaning and message of this tomb is its emptiness. Our Lord is not there. He is risen!

V. RESULTS

Death teaches us the final results of life’s choices. For all whose faith is in Jesus Christ, one nanosecond after death they will be in the presence of Jesus Christ. “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43) was his promise to the dying thief. It is the same Savior who gives the same promise to all who have trusted him.

For those who refuse, the choice is a disastrous one. John writes in Revelation 20:11-12,15: “Then I saw a great white throne and one seated on it. Earth and heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. I also saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. . . . And anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.” Tough words, but words not to be taken lightly. No one should live an undecided life. Choose life today. Learn the lessons from death, apply them to your own spiritual condition, and live now and forever in Jesus Christ, who conquered death.

Richard DeHaan, a marvelous Bible teacher and radio preacher, had two sons: Richard and Marvin. One day they were playing in an orchard near several bee hives. They irritated the bees, and one made straight for Richard's head and zapped him. The other boy began to cry and scream as the bee darted for him. DeHaan explained that the bee had only one stinger and Richard, unfortunately, had received it. The bee could buzz Marvin but it could not sting him. It had lost its power to sting.

Paul wrote, "Where, death, is your sting? . . . But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (1Co 15:55,57). The judgment of God does not fall on those whose trust is in the Lord, who takes the sting of eternal death. Lessons about death, when properly applied to our lives are invaluable for now and forever.

Of all deaths, that of a child is most unnatural and hardest to bear. We expect the old to die. While that kind of separation is always difficult, it comes as no surprise.

But the death of a young child or a youth is a different matter. Life with its beauty, wonder, and potential lies ahead for them. Death is a cruel thief when it strikes down the young.

In a way that is different from any other relationship, a child is bone of the parents' bone and flesh of their flesh. When a child dies, part of the parent is buried.¹ So writes Joseph Bayly, who had the sad duty of burying three of his children.

When we lose a child, the effect is widespread. It not only touches the parents, but it can involve siblings, grandparents, friends, and caregivers in a unique way. In the Scripture there is a story that offers us some insight and comfort as we share in this grief. David and Bathsheba's little boy lived only seven days.

I. REMINDER THAT ALL OF US CAN BE RECALLED

Life, when it is brief, is a reminder that all of us can be recalled at any time. Life is transitory. "Yes, every human being stands as only a vapor" (Ps 39:5). Since we have no guarantee of how long God chooses to grant life, we must maximize the opportunities God gives us. Count every blessing. Bless every day by counting.

II. RESPOND IN GRIEF UNTIL WE FIND RELIEF

The illness and death of David's child teaches us how to respond in grief until we find relief. There must be the expression of grief. It must do its work. David did not try to bury his feelings. Grief is a felt response. It must not be smothered. David made a mistake in his grief in that he tried to grieve alone. A grief shared is a burden divided. "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep" (Rm 12:15).

Time will bring some healing, but it will not heal all the wound. Billy Graham wrote, "Time does not heal. It's what you do with the time that heals . . . a long life or a short life are of equal importance to God."² If we bury our grief, it is like a toxic waste. It will surface again, and the contamination makes for more trouble. Time alone doesn't overcome sorrow, because sorrow is neutral, a vacuum. Therefore, we turn to the only One who can enable us to deal with our grief: God. "The Lord is near the brokenhearted; he saves those crushed in spirit" (Ps 34:18). Faith in Jesus Christ, who is the resurrection and the life, gives us unexpected strength. We grieve, but not as those who have no hope.

When David was told his child was dead, he made a statement in his grief that has brought comfort to people for generations: "But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I'll go to him, but he will never return to me" (2Sm 12:23). David recognized there was a distinctive line between this world and the next. The child would not come back, but he would go to the child.

¹ Joseph Bayly, *The View from a Hearse* (Elgin, Ill: David C. Cook Publishing, 1973), 65.

² Billy Graham, *Facing Death* (Minneapolis: Grason, 1987), 79.

How can we be sure that an infant or child has gone to heaven since they may not have accepted Jesus Christ? Because they were too young to have chosen sin, to have reached an accountable age, to have known about sin and salvation through Jesus Christ. The saving work of Christ has reversed sin's curse and covered this little one.

David felt assured of his child's presence in heaven and also that he would be there as well. David had sinned; he was accountable. Why did he have hope? Psalm 51 is the eloquent expression of David's confession of sin and guilt. He sought God's forgiveness and he received it. The Scriptures are clear: "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rm 10:13). This child is in the Lord's presence by God's grace. And through Jesus Christ we will get there too.

III. RECOGNIZE THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

The death of a child is a time to recognize the sovereignty of God. That growing awareness brings rest to our spirit. Scripture clearly illustrates God loves children. Hoping that Jesus might touch them, people brought babies to him. When the disciples saw this, they tried to send them away. But Jesus said to his disciples, "Let the little children come to me, and don't stop them, because the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Lk 18:16-17).

When a child dies, all of us struggle with the purpose and will of God. Every person has a purpose in the divine design. Marshall Shelley and his wife lost a child shortly after birth. In writing about that brief life and their grief, he said, "Why did God create a child to live two minutes? He didn't. He did not create Mandy to live two years. He did not create me to live forty years (or whatever number he may choose to extend my days in this world). God created Mandy for eternity. He created each of us for eternity, where we may be surprised to find our true calling, which always seemed just out of reach here on earth."³

IV. RELEASE THIS CHILD UNTIL WE ARE REJOINED

Finally, we ask God to give us peace as we seek to release this child until we are rejoined. David said, "Can I bring him back again? I'll go to him, but he will never return to me" (2Sm 12:23). David's response and insight carries penetrating truth for us. The Scriptures tell us that he went to the house of the Lord and worshiped, comforted his wife, and returned to the business of life (12:20,24,29).

This child has brought joy and taught us so much about the precious gift of a child. Though grief hammers at our hearts and the memories will always be cherished, we realize, because of Jesus and his victory over death, that there will be a reunion.

Kenneth McFarland told of an item he found on the obituary page of the newspaper in a small southern town. It read, "Billy, it was just a year ago today that you left us and the sunshine went out of our lives. But, we turned on the headlights and we're going on . . . and Billy, we

³ Marshall Shelley, "Two Minutes to Eternity," *Christianity Today* (1994), 25.

shall keep on doing the best we can until that glorious day when we shall see you again." It was signed simply "Love, the family." No names, just a simple testimony to the kind of faith that enables a person to go on in the face of sorrow and death.⁴

Until we come to that day when all mysteries, purposes, and plans of God are sorted out for us in the day when we shall see God face-to-face, let us be thankful that this life has enriched us and made us better because of it.

Nathaniel Timothy Kuck was a beautiful child, who spent most of his four and one-half years overcoming physical obstacles. When he went to be with the Lord, a neighbor, blessed by his life and the comments of his father at the memorial service, wrote these words as if the father, Tim, were writing:

As I look back on what the years did bring,
I wouldn't change a single thing.
He taught me how to appreciate life,
he taught my girls, and taught my wife.
Now he dances with David and fishes with Peter;
I can't imagine a life that's neater.
When I look back, the conclusion I draw
'Twas me who got the longest straw.⁵

This child belongs to God. Today we release his hands as God has grasped them over there, and he will never let them go. "The key to your child's casket is not in the hands of the keeper of the cemetery. But the key is in the hands of the Son of God, and he will come some morning and use it."⁶

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "the one who is, who was, and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rv 1:8).

⁴ Quoted in Paul Powell, *Death from the Other Side* (Dallas: Annuity Board of the SBC, 1991), 27.

⁵ From a letter sent by Paul Kuck to friends. Author of poem is Walter Ketcham, Orlando, Florida, December 2001. Used by permission.

⁶ Erwin Lutzer, *One Minute After Death* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), 76.

The memorial service for a student is a time of deep sorrow and reflection. Young people sometimes feel immune to death and tragedy. When it strikes, they are hard hit. Emotions run high. Memories of regret and happiness comingle. In such a time, the pastor has a golden opportunity to bring comfort, hope, and the message of salvation.

In planning with the family for a memorial service, the following suggestions serve as helpful guidelines for a meaningful tribute to their deceased student. These include music by the school choirs, an opening and closing prayer by a classmate, and remembering the student with brief testimonials by friends, classmates, or a student pastor. The testimonials should include some humorous memories, as well as those of high moments of accomplishment or service to the Lord, church, school, friends, and community. A video always carries images that bring out the best of the student's life. Worship music should be that which speaks to eternal truths, as well as to the contemporary ear of their classmates.

Every death reminds us that our time on earth is limited. We are never guaranteed a tomorrow. We only have today. That is a reminder to all of us to live life to the fullest, to love life, to appreciate life, and to make life count. Jesus, who lived only thirty-three years, reminds us that he came that we might have life and have it to the full.

What is a full life? What is real life? What makes a life—though short in number of years—a life that conquers? Paul, one of the most brilliant men who ever lived and a devoted follower of Jesus Christ, understood that kind of life. Near the end of his own life, he wrote, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Rm 8:37).

To be victorious means to conquer, vanquish, subdue, reduce, overcome, overthrow. These conquerors are what a football coach calls “impact players.” Impact players influence our lives. They are people who make a difference wherever they are, whatever their age. These individuals hold certain things in common.

I. MAKES THE RIGHT CHOICE

The first thing they hold in common is that they make the right choice. Years ago, Joshua, a great soldier for God, spoke these words: “Choose for yourselves today: Which will you worship . . . ? As for me and my family, we will worship the Lord” (Jos 24:15). A young man approached Jesus and asked him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus’s response was, “Follow me” (Mk 10:17,21). We are very valuable to God. So valuable that he gave his Son Jesus Christ to die in our place and granted us the privilege to choose to live with him forever. We must make that choice.

Adam Burtle, an atheist student from Woodinville, WA, startled many eBay searchers when he ran this item: “20-year-old Seattle boy’s SOUL, hardly used. Please realize, I make no warranties as to the condition of the soul. As of now, it is near mint condition with only minor scratches.” The bidding had reached four hundred dollars when eBay officials removed the listing and suspended Burtle from the site.⁷

⁷ Author unknown, *Orlando Sentinel*, 2001.

How much is our soul worth? "This is how we have come to know love: He laid down his life for us" (1Jn 3:16). The life that conquers realizes that we are very special to God, and that we have made a personal decision to choose him to be our Savior and Lord. This is the most important choice you will ever make.

II. FULFILLS GOD'S PURPOSE

The second thing that conquerors in Christ hold in common is a life that fulfills God's purpose. God has a purpose and plan for every one of us. "I chose you before I formed you in the womb; I set you apart before you were born. I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jr 1:5). Every person should ask himself the questions that a teacher once asked a group of students to ponder: *What do you live for? How do you get it? Is it worth it?*

Dr. Seuss, whose writings have entertained children for years, spoke at a commencement at Lake Forest College, outside Chicago. He decided to make it the world's shortest address and get it down to one minute, fourteen seconds.

Dr. Seuss talked about an uncle who placed an order for popovers at a restaurant. As he gazed at the roll of pastry lying before him, he concluded it was mostly air. He made the philosophical observation that in life a person would be very wise to do a lot of "spitting out the hot air" that passes for wisdom in a dumbed-down world.

God's purpose for your life includes the big things and the little things. He has a plan for your education, your school activities, your involvement in his church, the person you are to marry, and what you do for a living.

Many students feel like the young man who was asked by Lloyd Ogilvie, chaplain of the U.S. Senate, "What is your greatest need and your greatest fear?" To which he responded, "Sir, my greatest need is to know God's perfect will for my life. My greatest fear is that I will miss it, or if I know it, that I will resist doing it."⁸

You can be sure of knowing God's purpose for your life through a genuine relationship with him. He is your Father, and he is the one who will communicate with you. He will communicate that purpose through his Word, godly counselors, and circumstances. He will lead you as you release your will to him.

That release can be best pictured by imagining a blank piece of paper. Sign your name at the bottom, and then let God fill in the blanks. You will be in for the ride of your life, whatever its length may be.

Someone has said:

To know him is to love him;
to love him is to trust him;

⁸ Lloyd Ogilvie, *Ask Him Anything* (Waco: Word Books, 1981), 46.

to trust him is to obey him;
to obey him is to be blessed.

In the National Gallery of Art hang some of the great original masterpieces—done by the artists themselves in their own oils with their own strokes. They are masterpieces. In a little shop at the gallery you can purchase copies of the originals for a dollar. Someone has pointed out that each one of us must decide whether we will “give ourselves to Jesus Christ and become the divine original God intended or whether we will refuse Christ . . . and remain a cheap copy of what we might have been.”¹⁰ The life that conquers is a life that is intentional in knowing and doing God’s will.

III. CONQUERS WITH COURAGE

The third characteristic of a life that conquers is a life of courage. God has never promised us an easy life, but he has assured us that he will give us courage to face the difficulties, struggles, heartaches, and disappointments of life. At least sixteen times in the Bible, God encourages us to take courage. We need courage to fight prejudice, to speak up for those no one will speak up for, to keep our lives pure, to be a friend to those who others may leave out, to face fears, to try again when we have failed, to live our convictions that come from character formed by eternal truths, and to persevere.

The movie *Braveheart* tells the story of William Wallace, probably the greatest hero of Scotland. His life and legend have been strong in Scotland for nearly seven hundred years. William Wallace was a committed Christian. When England tried to claim Scotland, Wallace would not surrender to the king of England. He fought and defeated the English in several key battles. The king tried to gain his cooperation by offering him position, titles, money, and land. Wallace refused.

His courage was so contagious that it rubbed off on Robert the Brave, the logical successor to become the next king of Scotland. Robert’s father was a coward who was secretly cooperating with the king of England. He persuaded his son to do the same. Disguised as a masked knight, the son was dispatched to kill Wallace. In combat, Wallace got the upper hand, unmasked Robert the Brave, and was shocked to see his betrayal. Rather than killing him, Wallace rode away to safety.

Young Robert realized he was a Judas, a betrayer. He returned to his father in anguish and confessed that his actions were tearing him apart. His father said, “All men betray. All lose heart.” The son replied, “I don’t want to lose heart. I want to believe as he [Wallace] does. I will never be on the wrong side again.”

Someone has observed that there are not many bravehearts left. “There are many faint of heart. The bravehearts have always been in the minority.”¹¹ The life that conquers is a life of courage.

¹⁰ Richard Halverson “Perspective,” a bi-weekly devotional letter, McLean, Virginia, January 25, 1989.

IV. MARKS LIFE WITH SERVICE

The life that conquers is a life that is marked by service. Through the centuries, God has used youth to serve him and mankind. One of Jesus's disciples, John, was probably a teenager when he began to follow Jesus. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a young woman in her teens when she was chosen to bring God's Son into the world.

Sometimes you may feel like Charlie Brown in the *Peanuts* comic strip. Charlie and Lucy were looking up at the millions of stars above. Charlie said, "Space is too large." In the next frame, Lucy said, "We don't really need all that room . . . most of those planets and stars are way too big!" She continued in the next frame, "The whole solar system needs readjusting." Charlie turned to her and said, "What can we, as individuals do?"¹²

You can be different from the crowd around you. You can take God seriously and make a profound difference wherever he places you. Peter stated this plainly: "Just as each one has received a gift, use it to serve others, as good stewards of the varied grace of God" (1Pt 4:10).

In Orlando, Florida, the young athlete, popular student, and active Christian, Brent Bolin was killed in an automobile accident. His sudden death grieved his family and all who knew him. Months later, the weight room at his school was dedicated in his honor. Brent's mother read these words, which speak so eloquently of dedicating what God has given you to him:

"You are God's opportunity in your day. He has waited ages for a person just like you. Go where he sends you to go. Do what he gives you to do. Do you know him? Now, go and make him known by living a noble life. Do "godly-good" for those around you.

"If he has blessed you with spiritual strength, be noble by praying for those who are weak in their faith. Remind them that they, too, are Jesus's own.

"If he has blessed you with physical strength, be noble by defending those who struggle each day with those who seek to harm them. Speak up and speak out against hatred, prejudice, and malice.

"If he has blessed you with mental strength and intellectual abilities, be noble by discovering a cure for a disease, tell the gospel in a language never spoken, and find solutions to elevate your brothers and sisters out of misery.

"If he has blessed you to be socially strong and if making friends comes easily to you, be noble by befriending those who feel that they don't belong and struggle to be accepted . . . help free them from their loneliness.

"If he has blessed you with emotional strength and you are content with who you are, be noble by 'standing on the wall'; and encourage those who are saddened by life by

¹¹ Steve Farrar, *Anchor Man* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 170.

¹² Charles Schultz, "Peanuts," *Winston-Salem Journal*, February 23, 1962, as quoted in Jack Ricks Noffsinger, *It's Your Turn Now* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1964), 41.

building them up in Christ. You will strengthen them and help them find joy.

“If he has blessed you with artistic strength in all its diversity, be noble by using these talents to show the world the divine, unlimited beauty of God.

“Do not refuse God his opportunity that he seeks through you. Remember, there is only one like you on this earth *and there is no other*.

“In Hebrews 12, the author says to us, Run the race that is before us . . . never give up . . . never quit. Keep your eyes on Jesus who began and finished the race of life. He finished strong, so we too can finish strong.”¹³

Paul’s words were autobiographical. Out of his own personal tribulations, he challenges us to be “more than conquerors” (Rm 8:37). Literally, he says, “We are super conquerors! Not just victors, but ‘super victors’!”¹⁴ Today we may go away with our grief, but we do not go away defeated. Because Jesus Christ conquered sin, death, and all evil powers, so do we when we choose him as Savior, fulfill his purpose in our lives, live a life of courage, and serve him and our fellow man nobly. We win! We are eternal impact players! We are super conquerors!

¹¹ Permission to include this charge to the other students granted by Brent’s mother, Tracy Bolin.

¹² R. Kent Hughes, *Romans* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 170-71

God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform; he plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace; Behind a frowning providence, he hides a smiling face. Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan his word in vain; God is his own interpreter and he will make it plain.

– William Cowper

This hymn is one of many that were written by a man who had a record of long struggles with the drive to take his own life. William Cowper first attempted suicide when he was a young English lawyer. During a fit of madness, he tried to penetrate his heart with a penknife, but the point was broken. He then resorted to hanging himself with a garter, but it slipped off the nail.

After eighteen months in a “lunatic asylum” (as it was known in those days), he was released and became a friend of John Newton, the famous evangelical minister. Newton suggested they jointly publish a hymnbook. “Amazing Grace” became Newton’s most famous contribution. And “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” became Cowper’s best-known hymn. Cowper’s majestic hymn was written after he went through the horror of another mental breakdown. At that time, he felt God demanded that he kill himself, like Judas, in order to hasten his final doom in hell. But he then rose out of the valley of the dark shadow to enjoy decades as the most popular poet of his eighteenth-century era. Even so, he ended his life in a mental institution, where he wrote his famous poem of despair, “The Castaway.”¹⁵

In this hour of darkness and uncertainty, we look to the Scriptures to give us a measure of reassurance: “I will have compassion on you with everlasting love,” says the Lord your Redeemer . . . “Though the mountains move and the hills shake, my love will not be removed from you and my covenant of peace will not be shaken,” says your compassionate Lord (Is 54:8,10).

I. UNEXPLAINABLE?

In our grief and distress, we must acknowledge that suicide is unexplainable. To choose death over life goes against the tide of life that flows from the heart of our Creator God. Everything God touches brings life. We know that it is his will that we live.

Someone has written, “If there is God in it, it doesn’t matter ever so little how we feel about it: it is an unbelievably precious and incalculable and endless thing.”¹⁶ But the nagging question of “why” dogs our minds. If the question was answered and we knew the reason, the riddle would still be unanswered.

The family of the suicide victim carries a special grief. One mother whose teenage son took his life compared it to carrying a book bag loaded with boulders. The book bag may be

¹⁵ James Clemons, *Sermons on Suicide* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 87.

¹⁶ Paul Scherer, “God’s Claim on a Man’s Mind,” in *Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching*, edited by Clyde E. Fant Jr. and William M. Pinson Jr. (Waco: Word Books, 1971), 10:331.

filled with regret one day, feelings of failure the next, and guilt the next. But no matter what's in it, the book bag always weighs her down. Family, we offer our prayers, love, and support as you begin to reshape your lives.

Guy Delaney framed it for us this way: "What questions can we ask and what answers can we expect? Some questions we hesitate to ask for fear of the answers we may get, and some answers we give are worse than no answers. Any one of us might give the answer that was given to a Frenchman who, at the turn of the century, went to a physician and said, 'Doctor, you've got to help me. I can't go on with life. Please help me end it all.' And the doctor said, 'Now, now, my friend, you mustn't talk that way. You must laugh and smile and enjoy life. Make friends. Mix with people. Why not go to the circus tonight and see the great clown Debereau. He will make you laugh and forget your troubles.' The man looked into the face of the physician with his sad eyes and said in a painful whisper, 'But doctor, I am Debereau.' "¹⁷

II. UNUSUAL?

As we struggle with our questions and our inadequacies, we may be overcome with the sense that maybe we failed at some point. We may be overcome with anger and guilt. We must sadly admit that, although we do not know all the circumstances surrounding this death; unfortunately suicide is not unusual.

We say not unusual because of biblical, historical, and contemporary records. There are seven recorded instances of suicide in the Bible. Every year approximately two million people attempt suicide, and fifty thousand are successful. Every minute someone tries to self-destruct. Five thousand youth succeed.¹⁸ The highest suicide rate is among the elderly. Suicides occur most frequently in the spring and holiday seasons, on Thursday, among Protestants. Three or four times as many men as women take their lives in this country.¹⁹

In the face of this, how must we respond? We, the living, have responsibilities to the fellow citizens of our community of life. One thing we can do is not to be judgmental. We do not know what causes a person to resort to taking his own life. It can be burdens about which we had no knowledge; or overwhelming tension, anxiety, failures, unresolved guilt, loneliness; or the relentless attack of our ancient adversary, Satan, whom the Bible calls our accuser. It can be a chemical imbalance that, for a period of time, causes reason to be replaced, mental control to be lost, and judgment and the stronger sense of pursuing life to be snapped.

We must be compassionate and understanding. We should be sensitive to the cries for help that surface in our families, friends, and colleagues. If someone mentions suicide to us, we should take it seriously. We should express genuine interest in their problems, listen carefully to such phrases as "I'm thinking about checking out" or "I'm just tired of living." Don't argue. Act quickly to get them to a professional Christian counselor, and pray for them and with them. These simple things can be the difference between life and death. We should

¹⁷ Clemons, *Sermons on Suicide*, 44.

¹⁸ Billy Friel, *What Should I Do When* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 18.

¹⁹ Clemons, *Sermons on Suicide*, 81.

humbly remember as one has written: “We are all so much more fragile than we know—because what we feel and do can hardly be understood apart from our past and present life circumstances . . . we must all bear in mind, ‘There, but for the grace of God, go I.’”²⁰

III. UNFORGIVABLE?

What about the question of suicide as being the unforgivable sin? The church had little to say about it in the early centuries, but Augustine, in the fourth century, asserted that suicide was a sin. By AD 563, the church prohibited funerals for any suicide, regardless of the circumstances, and by 1284 refused a suicide victim’s burial in a consecrated cemetery.²¹ Theologian Thomas Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, wrote that it was the worst sin of all because you could not repent.

What should we say? Is suicide a sin? Yes. God gives life. “I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance” (Jn 10:10). Is it unpardonable or unforgivable? No. A person can destroy the body, but not the spirit. The Bible is clear that we go either to heaven or hell based solely on our relationship to Jesus Christ. “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses . . . For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift” (Eph 2:4-5,8). We believe, as Scripture so firmly assures us, that all who have trusted Jesus Christ can never be separated from his eternal love.

Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ’s love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in the Scripture. . . . None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I’m absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God’s love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us (Rm 8:35-39, MSG).

IV. UNSHAKABLE?

In the midst of our questions and grief over this distressing and complex heartache, we turn our hearts to the supreme truth: We have a Savior who, in troubling times, is unshakable! Walter Winchell was a famous radio news commentator during World War II. Once, after a particularly dark week during which the port of Singapore fell, he closed his broadcast with this sentence: “Singapore has fallen, but the Rock of Ages stands.”²²

This is the time—when we walk through this windstorm of life—that we find our footing in the shifting sands of emotional feelings and mental anguish by looking to Jesus who prom-

²⁰ Ibid., 142.

²¹ Ibid., 19.

²² Paul Powell, *Death from the Other Side* (Dallas: Annuity Board of the SBC, 1991), 46

ised, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives" (Jn 14:27).

We stand on God's Word in times like this, for his Word . . .
Teaches us the greatest truth,
Offers the greatest good,
Meets the greatest need,
Holds out the greatest hope.²³

²³ Vernon Grounds, *Ministry*, September 1999, 11.

03 SECTION

ARTICLES FROM
EXPERIENCED PASTORS
AND CHURCH LEADERS

Leadership is a hot topic. Myriads of books dissect it from every angle, universities offer doctoral degrees on it, and leadership gurus debate over the exact combination of personality types and attributes that make the perfect leader. While much of this conversation is profitable, perhaps the attempt to produce a formula for making the ultimate leader has caused us to lose the wonder of God's providence in choosing and using leaders. Throughout history, God has raised up men and women, some weak and some strong, some smart and some slow, in certain seasons and certain situations, to accomplish his overarching purposes in the world. A distinctly Christian understanding of leadership must be biblically rooted and theologically formed. Even a cursory study of the biblical witness provides several prominent elements necessary for our understanding of leadership.

First, our leadership is a derivative leadership sourced in God himself. He establishes nations and governments and directs the course of the king's heart (Pr 21:1; Rm 13:1). He dresses the lilies of the field and watches over the sparrow (Mt 6:26-31; 10:29). This becomes even more explicit when talking about God's sovereign leadership over his church. Jesus is the head of the church and has been given authority over all (Eph 1:20; 5:23). He is the preeminent one and the "chief Shepherd" of the church (Col 1:18; 1Pt 5:4). Every joint and ligament in the body of Christ is held together and fits together in him (Eph 4:16; Col 2:19). God's sovereign leadership over all is foundational for understanding human leadership.

In short, because our leadership is ultimately derived from God's, it is always subservient, always secondary. In no way does this demean the role and responsibility of human leaders; rather, it defines the scope of human leadership. It puts it in its proper place and provides the right limitations. The apostle Paul discusses this in 2 Corinthians 5 when he describes the role and responsibility of the believer in ambassadorial terms (v. 20). We are sent to the world as agents on behalf of another. We are representatives carrying the message of one greater than ourselves.

Second, God raises up leaders. They are born under his auspices. They are elected under his watch. They rise to the occasion under his reign. They are given a voice by his decree. He builds up platforms and dismantles platforms. He gives some of them long seasons of influence, while others have shorter windows in which to serve.

Yet in all of this, there is mystery. God's sovereign reign over leaders does not diminish the freedom for humanity to seize opportunities. Consider, for example, Mordecai's wisdom to Queen Esther: "If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jewish people from another place, but you and your father's family will be destroyed. Who knows, perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this" (Est 4:14). In this passage we see that God's purposes cannot be thwarted (namely, that deliverance will come to his people), but Esther still had the opportunity to act, to lead. God's sovereignty doesn't diminish our responsibility or opportunity.

²⁴ This section is indebted to A. D. Clarke, "Leadership," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. Desmond T. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

God doesn't call the qualified; he qualifies the called. How often we see him in Scripture calling the unexpected and the average into significant roles of leadership. In some sense, there is no concrete mold or predictable pattern for the person God raises up to lead. Consider the calling of Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery. Moses was filled with reluctance and anxiety. He was slow and hesitant in speech. How was he to be God's mouthpiece?

But Moses replied to the LORD, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent—either in the past or recently or since you have been speaking to Your servant—because my mouth and my tongue are sluggish."

The LORD said to him, "Who placed a mouth on humans? Who makes a person mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go! I will help you speak and I will teach you what to say" (Ex 4:10-12).

Samuel was called to anoint the new king of Israel, knowing it would be one of Jesse's sons. However, even this godly judge of Israel forgot that God qualifies those he calls. Samuel was looking for certain outward indicators of who this next king would be, but God shows us through the calling of David that a certain age, appearance, or pecking order is not God's criteria for leadership:

"In peace," he replied. "I've come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and said, "Certainly the LORD's anointed one is here before him."

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or his stature because I have rejected him. Humans do not see what the LORD sees, for humans see what is visible, but the Lord sees the heart."

Jesse called Abinadab and presented him to Samuel. "The LORD hasn't chosen this one either," Samuel said. Then Jesse presented Shammah, but Samuel said, "The LORD hasn't chosen this one either." After Jesse presented seven of his sons to him, Samuel told Jesse, "The LORD hasn't chosen any of these." Samuel asked him, "Are these all the sons you have?"

"There is still the youngest," he answered, "but right now he's tending the sheep." Samuel told Jesse, "Send for him. We won't sit down to eat until he gets here." So Jesse sent for him. He had beautiful eyes and a healthy, handsome appearance.

Then the LORD said, "Anoint him, for he is the one." So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully on David from that day forward. Then Samuel set out and went to Ramah (1Sm 16:5-13).

The testimony of God calling the ordinary and unexpected continues in the New Testament. Jesus's calling of the first disciples is a wonderful example of God choosing the ordinary, uneducated, and common to engage in a work that is extraordinary, brilliant, and supernatural. The apostle Paul reminds the Corinthian church to consider their calling. They were not wise.

They lacked power and influence and a good pedigree (1Co 1:26-31). Yet, he chose them to be his ambassadors to carry the most important message in the world.

Third, leadership is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Old Testament bears the story of how God called and anointed a specific group of people for specific functions. Prophets, priests, and kings each fulfilled distinct roles and responsibilities in the leading of God's people. In the New Testament, leadership is listed in one of the apostle Paul's list of spiritual gifts, found in Romans 12:6-8: "According to the grace given to us, we have different gifts: . . . if exhorting, in exhortation; giving, with generosity; *leading, with diligence . . .*" (italics added). Obviously, a common grace of leadership is extended to men and women who are not endowed with the gift of the Holy Spirit and are not believers in Jesus Christ. But the Scriptures make a specific point that there is a unique "gift" of leadership, sovereignly doled out to some for the edification of the church and the building up of the saints. And it is to be stewarded with diligence. The primary implication for leaders is that there is no room for boasting. God graciously gives gifts, leaving no room for haughty and prideful leadership.

Finally, godly leaders are concerned with God's agenda. Godly leadership is stewardship. It is the recognition that personal agendas, entitlements, vainglory, and selfish ambition must be put to death. A leader who is transformed by the gospel seeks not to make a name for himself but to lift high the name of Jesus. His obsession is not with building his own empire but living for the kingdom of God.

We see this example in Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Caleb, David, Isaiah, Daniel, the apostles, and in the Lord Jesus himself. The primary declaration of the godly leader is, "Yes, Lord, we wait for you in the path of your judgments. Our desire is for your name and renown" (Is 26:8).

The Scriptures are replete with examples of leadership, both godly and wicked, giving us several key theological points to extrapolate and ponder when considering leadership—its source, its purpose, its requirements upon those who lead.

When we think about the words of Jesus, we may remember his moral teachings or his declarations of divinity. We might quote some of his prayers or descriptions of being born again.

But we may not realize how much Jesus spoke about leadership and how his followers can become better leaders. One of Jesus's most important lessons on good leadership came after his disciples completely misunderstood what leadership meant in the kingdom of God.

In Matthew 20, John and James's mom came to Jesus with the idea of her two sons becoming co-vice presidents in Jesus's new administration. When the other disciples heard this, "they became indignant with the two brothers." Why? Scripture doesn't tell us, but we can easily guess.

The other disciples saw John and James's pride. But they saw it so clearly because the same pride and desire for power was in their own hearts. Recognizing this, in Matthew 20:25-28, Jesus spoke to them about what leadership should look like:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles Lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them. It must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

We can summarize his instructions on leadership in three statements:

1. Most people misuse power.

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles Lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them (v. 25.)

Jesus reminded the disciples, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles Lord it over them; they act like tyrants."

Make sure they know your title. Make sure they know you were handpicked, and they can be unpicked because you have the authority. Be sure to remind them—repeatedly—that you're kind of a big deal around here. They need to know you call the plays and they'd better run them.

That's one way to be a leader, but Jesus quickly went on to challenge that method.

2. You should not imitate the world's idea of leadership.

It must not be like that among you (v. 26).

This is one of the ways to show yourself as a Christ follower on the earth. This is one of the ways we are salt of the earth.

We should heed Paul's words to the Romans: "Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rm 12:2).

This is one of the reasons people should want to serve alongside Christians. Jesus's leaders don't Lord their authority over others. Christian leaders know they're an instrument in the hand of God, for as long as he sees fit.

I love the old words of Samuel Brengle:

The axe cannot boast of the trees it has cut down. It could do nothing but for the woodsman. He made it, he sharpened it, and he used it. The moment he throws it aside, it becomes only old iron. O, that I may never lose sight of this.

But we *do* lose sight of this.

With success and promotion, we secretly begin believing the lie that if we're placed in charge of other people, then God must love us individually more than others, be more proud of us than he is of them. That's how the carnal person thinks—that they're indispensable, that they're one of God's gifts to the world.

The world is full of people who are wrapped up in themselves, but Jesus tells his followers they're not to be like this.

3. You should make yourself a servant.

On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant (v. 26).

Those last words stand out to me.

When Jesus said, "Act a like a servant," in essence, he was saying: "Go around treating people as if they're smarter than you, as if they're more experienced than you."

The antithesis is perhaps more obvious. Don't go around reminding people you're more insightful and more astute than they are. Round down on yourself. Round up on others.

When you make yourself small, other people will talk about the big presence you fill in their lives.

Jesus said, "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will find it" (Mt 16:25).

The same can be said of leadership. When we try to grab power and cling to it, we will also find it slipping through our fingers. But the leaders who follow in Christ's footsteps and serve others will always find people willing to serve with them.

Pastors are a motley group of souls. We represent different personalities and tribes, different methodologies and styles, not to mention denominations, traditions, and theologies. But there is something many of us have in common—a profound sense of insecurity for which the only antidote is the gospel. It's easy to succumb to the temptation to compare one's ministry to that of another pastor or give in to the need to impress others and be liked.

The only remedy for these ministry idolatries and all others is the gospel because it announces, among many things, we are justified, accepted, loved, and satisfied by God in Christ. Until pastors discover and embrace their identity in Christ—which is accomplished by Christ and received by faith, not works—they will keep trying to find their identity in their position, their preaching, their persona, and their programs. While every pastor would affirm the gospel's centrality to their ministry, we still need to remind each other this isn't just some religious formality. Knowing how Christ's finished work works in our own lives and ministries is vitally important.

So how does it work? Why should we keep the good news of the finished work of Christ at the center of our hearts and the forefront of our minds? There are many reasons, but here are four of the more important ones.

1. Remember the gospel so you will have the power you need.

In the trenches of day-to-day ministry work, it can become tragically easy to think of the whole thing as a managerial enterprise. We plan and program, we mentor and coach, we write and preach. The relational work of ministry is taxing. Studying takes its toll. Nearly every pastor I know has been wearied by ministry. For this reason, we need to remember Christianity is not some ordinary religious methodology. It is supernatural.

We pray because we aren't in control. We preach the Scriptures because only God's Word can change hearts. We share the gospel because only the grace of Christ can bring the dead to life. We have to remember who we are in Christ, or we will go on ministry autopilot, assuming we're working under our own power.

Knowing the power of the gospel (Rm 1:16; 1Th 1:5) means the weakness of the pastor is no hindrance to the Lord at all. In fact, the very idea of Christianity presupposes human inability and weakness. Paul goes so far as to boast in his weakness, knowing that when he is weak, Christ is strong (2Co 12:9-10).

A Korean pastor once visited the United States and was asked what he thought of the American church, to which he replied, "It is amazing what the church in America can do without the Holy Spirit." May this never be said of us! If we pursue pastoral ministry in our own strength, trusting in our own selves, we will be in big trouble. Our churches will be devastated, and so will we. No, let us remember all that we are is because of Christ, and apart from him, we can do nothing. This reality will empower our leadership and our preaching and achieve real spiritual impact.

2. Remember the gospel so you won't be puffed up by success.

Because we are sinners, we are prone to taking more credit than we deserve. For the pastor, especially, the temptation grows to embrace the wrong kind of pride when things begin to go well in a church. It's fine to "be proud of" our churches. Paul often tells the churches they are "his boast." But he says this to encourage them and celebrate their growth, not to take credit for it!

When we implement a program and it takes off, isn't it tempting to believe we can program success? And when we receive great feedback on our sermons, isn't it tempting to believe spiritual impact comes from our well-turned phrases more than God's inspired Word? Maybe this isn't so for you, but it is for me. Success can be dangerous, especially for leaders.

When we remember our identity in Christ, we recall it is he who has made us, and not we ourselves (Ps 100:3). When we remember the gospel, it is impossible to get puffed up by success because the gospel is so humbling. It puts us in our place, while at the same time giving us great confidence. This is especially necessary when it's not success we are experiencing but failure.

3. Remember the gospel so you won't be devastated by failure.

I have pastored a church that tripled in attendance in a few short years and launched well-received program after program. And I've pastored a church that held people like a sieve, with new decline around every corner. I'm here to tell you neither was easier than the other. Both were equally tempting of the pride inside my heart.

The great thing about centering on the gospel of Jesus Christ for pastoral ministry is it helps guard against pride amid success, and it helps guard against despair amid failure. In lean times, we can become despondent about our ministries and get wrapped up in sulking and self-pity. Or we can turn angry and defensive. The gospel is so calibrating. When we focus on who we are in Christ, his glory washes away our ministry idols with tsunami-like force.

Focusing on Christ's glory changes us (2Co 3:18), even when there is no noticeable gain in ministry life. Think of Isaiah in the temple (see Is 6), or any of the other prophets. Think of how single-minded they were in God's work and his character in the midst of exile and captivity, when times were low. Knowing we belong to God, knowing we are united to Christ, knowing we are justified—not on the basis of our ministry success but on the basis of Christ's—is hugely satisfying and supernaturally encouraging.

Pastor, you need the gospel's clearing of the air, especially when the dust cloud of ministry rubble surrounds you. And one important way the gospel clears the air is by helping us correctly define success.

4. Remember the gospel so you will know how to measure success.

Growing a big church. Leading a growing staff. Preaching exceptional sermons. These are all admirable. But none of them is anything the Bible actually calls us to do. That doesn't make them wrong goals. It just means we shouldn't tune our hearts to our relative success in them. No, the Bible calls pastors to do only a few important things: make disciples, feed the sheep, equip the saints. This means it's not the pastor's job to be successful but to be faithful.

Pastor, may the Lord grant you incredible success. We can even pray he would help us be successful in the things he's called us to do. But let us pray more often and more fervently that he would keep us faithful. No one gets into heaven because of a big church or a dynamic preaching style. No one gets the crown because of book deals or speaking platforms or social media followers. We are saved by grace alone.

Reflecting on his time in Corinth, Paul writes these incredible words:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? They are servants through whom you believed, and each has the role the Lord has given.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth (1Co 3:5-7).

Big budgets and big buildings are not the true measure of our ministry's success. The true measure is the faithfulness with which we both trusted in and led people to the glory of the risen Christ. True ministry success comes not from our increasing but from Christ's (Jn 3:30).

This is why it's important to remember our identity in Christ—because we are “not anything.” Only God is. Let us pastor ourselves in and pastor others to that reality.

GLORIFYING GOD IN YOUR MINISTRY

CHARLES SPURGEON

The grand purpose of the Christian ministry is the glory of God. Whether souls are converted or not, if Jesus Christ be faithfully preached, the minister has not labored in vain because he is a sweet aroma to God as well in them that perish as in them that are saved. Yet, as a rule, God has sent us to preach in order that through the gospel of Jesus Christ humanity may be reconciled to him. Here and there a preacher of righteousness like Noah may labor on and bring none beyond his own family circle into the ark of salvation. Another like Jeremiah may weep in vain over an unrepentant nation. But for the most part, the work of preaching is intended to save the hearers. It is ours to sow even in stony places, where no fruit rewards our toil, but still we are bound to look for a harvest and mourn if it does not appear in due time.

The glory of God being our chief purpose, we aim at it by seeking the edification of saints and the salvation of sinners. It is a noble work to instruct the people of God and to build them up in their most holy faith. We may by no means neglect this duty. To this end we must give clear statements of gospel doctrine, vital experience, and Christian duty and never shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God. In too many cases awe-inspiring truths are avoided under the false belief that they are not practical, while the very fact that they are revealed proves that the Lord thinks them to be of value. And woe unto us if we pretend to be wiser than he. If any one note is dropped from the divine harmony of truth, the music may be sadly marred. Your people may fall into grave spiritual diseases through the lack of a certain form of spiritual nutrition, which can only be supplied by the doctrines which you withhold. In the food which we eat, there are ingredients which do not at first appear to be necessary to life, but experience shows that health and strength require them. Phosphorus will not make flesh, but bones need it to grow. Many earths and salts come under the same description; they are necessary in due proportion to the human body. Thus, even certain truths, which appear to be ill suited for spiritual nutrition, are nevertheless very beneficial in providing believers with backbone and muscle and in repairing the various organs of Christian adulthood. We must preach "the whole truth," that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for all good works.

Our great purpose of glorifying God is, however, to be mainly achieved by the winning of souls. We *must* see souls born to God. If we do not, our cry should be that of Rachel, "Give me sons, or I will die" (Gn 30:1). If we do not win souls, we should mourn as the farmer who sees no harvest, as the fisherman who returns to his cottage with an empty net, or as the hunter who has in vain roamed over hill and valley. Ours should be Isaiah's language spoken with many a sigh and groan: "Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" (Is 53:1). The ambassadors of peace should not cease to weep bitterly until sinners weep for their sins.

WHAT IS BIBLICAL PREACHING?

KYLE IDLEMAN

As early as AC 2, Luke wrote that Christians were devoted to “the apostles’ teaching,” which has at least *something* to do with what we would call “biblical preaching” today. Many scholars believe that much of the New Testament came from sermons that first were preached then written down to form our Bible. And before that, Jesus’s own ministry was marked by his preaching (Mt 4:17,23; 5–7; Mk 1:14-15; Lk 11, just to name a few).

Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection was the turning point of history. But unless that good news is proclaimed—and proclaimed in fresh, relevant ways to each new generation in their specific time and place—it is in danger of remaining merely a historical fact. God’s plan to keep the gospel alive and transformative for people in every generation is for preachers to faithfully proclaim it (1Co 1:18-25).

So at its core, biblical preaching should always be the gospel, God’s good news about Jesus. I’m aware that most of you who are reading this already understand the foundation of the gospel and the blueprint of the New Testament letters in answering the question “What is Biblical Preaching?” So, allow me to address two other factors that are connected to biblical preaching but often overlooked:

The unique personality of the preacher.
The distinct perspective of the audience.

One of my favorite ways to think about preaching is Phillips Brooks’ well-known definition, “Truth through personality.” According to Brooks, every preacher will—and should—preach God’s Word a little bit differently. It’s his truth through who he made me to be. Though we would never want to overshadow the former with the latter, we recognize that God speaks through the uniqueness of his servants. Pick any prophet, or read through the New Testament letters to the churches, and it seems clear that God’s messengers were doing more than impersonally relaying a message. Preaching is not just about what is said, but who is saying it.

Even Jesus didn’t just *tell* us the gospel. He didn’t just shout a set of truths from heaven and expect everyone to figure out what to do about it. He came to earth, lived among real people in a real place, and gave specific examples of what exactly it was going to mean for people to respond to the gospel.

Jesus preached the same truth we try to preach every weekend in church, but he did it in a specific way for the people in his time and his place. And all of us preachers should do the same. That, in part, is the difference between preaching the Bible and teaching a history textbook. We don’t just recite historical facts. We—through our personality, experiences, and cultural lenses—preach about how those biblical truths impact our lives in the present and in eternity.

An example of biblical preaching is found in Nehemiah 8. At this point in Nehemiah’s story, the major project of rebuilding Jerusalem’s wall has been completed and the people who returned from exile are settling back into their homes. Then at the beginning of chapter 8, they all gather in the city square and have a worship service. The service started with Ezra

WHAT IS BIBLICAL PREACHING?

KYLE IDLEMAN

reading Scripture for about six hours. But after that, it says that there were some other priests there with Ezra who “explained the law to the people” (8:7). And here’s how Nehemiah 8:8 describes what they did: “They read the book of the law of God, translating and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read.”

It was the priests calling to read Scripture and “translat[e].” Another way to say that Hebrew phrase could be “mak[e] it clear” (NIV). Whether people know a lot of Bible or not, there will always be a historical and cultural gap between our world and the biblical world. It’s the job of a biblical preacher to try to bridge that gap through clarification and application.

As a preacher then I am constantly aware that I am, as John Stott describes it, living between two worlds—the biblical text and the lives of people. I have to constantly remind myself that if I am not immersed in the text, living and breathing it for myself, then I will probably have a hard time trying to make it come alive for the people who hear me preach. And unless I am connected to the real stories, the real hurts, the real experiences and fears and successes of people, I will most likely not be able to connect God’s truth to their lives in my preaching. Preaching is a bridge building operation where a real person connects the real Jesus to real people.

A Christ-centered understanding of Scripture should lead us to a Christ-centered philosophy of expository preaching. So, what exactly does it mean to “preach Christ?” Sidney Greidanus defines preaching Christ “as preaching sermons which authentically integrate the message of the text with the climax of God’s revelation in the person, work, and/or teaching of Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament.”²⁵ To see Christ formed in our people, we should always emphasize, in our exposition, the unique person, work, and/or teaching of the Messiah. Graeme Goldsworthy expresses the heart of Christ-exalting exposition, saying, “It ought to be the aim of every pastor to bring all members of his or her congregation to maturity in Christ. But they cannot mature if they do not know the Christ in the Bible, the Christ to whom the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments, give a unified and inspired testimony.”²⁶

I want to underline four biblical reasons why we should read the Scriptures Christocentrically. First, Jesus clearly saw himself as the fulfillment of the Old Testament writings. Those who wish to challenge the unity of the Bible and its Christocentric emphasis must give an answer to several biblical texts that seem to demonstrate this idea. For example, one should consider the following texts:

“You pore over the Scriptures because you think you have eternal life in them, and yet they testify about me” (Jn 5:39).

“For if you believed Moses, you would believe me, because he wrote about me” (Jn 5:46).

“He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. And the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him. He began by saying to them, ‘Today as you listen, this Scripture has been fulfilled’” (Lk 4:20-21).

“Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted for them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures” (Lk 24:27).

“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Lk 24:44).

A commitment to Christ-exalting exposition is consistent with the expositional principles of Jesus. Jesus said that the Scriptures were about him! Do not let enlightenment literary concepts or modern skepticism and relativism keep you from affirming this basic belief.

Second, the apostles knew that the Bible focused upon Jesus. Paul bookends his letter to the Romans with statements about the Old Testament and the Messiah (Rm 1:1b-3; 16:25-27). He tells the Corinthians that Christ died for our sins “according to the Scriptures,” and that he was buried and raised on the third day “according to the Scriptures” (referring to the OT

²⁵ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 8.

²⁶ Graeme Goldsworthy, “Biblical Theology as the Heartbeat of Effective Ministry,” in *Biblical Theology*, ed. Scott J. Hafemann (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 286.

Scriptures). He also told Timothy that the Old Testament is able to give a person “wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tm 3:15).

The apostolic preaching in Acts also illustrates how the Old Testament was used as the means of preaching to unbelievers. Peter’s first sermon consisted of an exposition of Joel and Pss 16 and 110 (Ac 2:14-34). A few days later he preached about Jesus fulfilling God’s promises and what the prophets foretold about the Messiah (3:18-25). In Ac 8, Philip explained to the Ethiopian eunuch that Isaiah 53 speaks of Jesus. Christ-exalting preaching from the Old Testament is powerfully demonstrated in Paul’s first recorded sermon in Ac 13. Here, Paul preaches the death of Jesus and references several Old Testament texts (Ps 2:7; 16:10; Is 49:6; 55:3; Hab 1:5). In Thessalonica, Paul does not hand out gospel tracts but, instead, reasons from the Scriptures in order to proclaim Christ (Ac 17:2-3). In Corinth, “Paul devoted himself to preaching the word and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah” (18:5). When before Agrippa, Paul says, “I stand and testify to both small and great, saying nothing other than what the prophets and Moses said would take place—that the Messiah must suffer, and that, as the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light to our people and to the Gentiles” (26:22-23). At the end of Acts, Luke records, “From dawn to dusk he expounded and testified about the kingdom of God. He tried to persuade them about Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets” (28:23). This was how the apostles read the Bible and how they preached it. Clearly they followed Jesus’s words about the message of the Bible.

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is a Christian book. The whole Bible tells us the story of the Redeemer. It is more than an inspired book of moral virtues. It is a book about salvation. Sadly, many people know Bible stories but do not know the story of the Bible. While some Bible teachers are more “minimalists than maximalists” on the Christocentric emphasis scale, everyone should at least see that the whole Bible is Christian Scripture—and should seek to teach and apply Scripture in a redemptive manner.

In encouraging this type of reading, I am not advocating allegory or clever “Jesus-jukes” (also called spiritualizing). Some well-intended but misguided people, in their zeal to preach Christ, sometimes play fast and loose with the Bible, making cavalier and fanciful correspondences that are not in the text. Every time you read about wood in the Old Testament, it does not stand for the cross. Every time you see the color red, it does not signify blood. These are examples of silly, unfounded allegorical readings. What I am advocating is seeing the inner-biblical connections that lead us to Jesus—not allegory. The apostles saw them. Exegete responsibly and do good biblical theology. And if you do not think allegory is ridiculous, try to allegorize your wife’s grocery list sometime! If you come home and say, “Well, you wrote down marshmallows, but I took that to mean toilet paper,” she will not like your interpretative method! No, study the text in its historical context but then use your full-court vision to survey the entire biblical narrative, and lead people to the Redeemer with valid inner-biblical themes and connections. This leads to a third argument.

Third, we should see and expound Christ in all the Scriptures because of the thematic and climactic nature of Scripture. Some theologians propose one primary theme in Scripture over

others, such as the kingdom of God, the presence of God, creation and new creation, or the offices of Jesus. I prefer to see these themes as many sides to the diamond of Scripture. Each displays a sense of glory and uniqueness to the beautiful unity of the Bible. These themes move climactically to the New Testament fulfillments. Again, Scripture is seen in a progressive nature, reaching its apex in Christ. So, I am not saying that every single verse in the Bible is directly speaking about Jesus. We should not go to Joshua 2:1 and say, "Oh, that's about Jesus," but what we should realize is that all the plot lines converge on Christ. All of the imbedded themes of salvation converge in him. Learn to look for these themes and see how these themes escalate until they reach their apex in the Messiah, and may you find your heart strangely "warmed" like those Emmaus disciples.

Finally, Christ-exalting exposition makes sense when you consider the primary purpose of the Spirit. Jesus said of the Spirit, "He will testify about me" (Jn 15:26) and "He will glorify me" (16:14). The primary role of the Spirit is to shine the spotlight upon the Son of God. The nature of the Bible illustrates his Christ-exalting work. Bruce Ware reminds us, "For although the Spirit is primarily responsible for producing the Bible as the inspired Word of God, the Bible is not primarily about the Spirit but rather it is about the Son."²⁷ On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit is poured out, Peter exalts Jesus from the Scripture (Ac 2:14-36), and people are converted. As the Scriptures are preached, the Spirit opens hearts of people to respond in repentance and faith to Jesus (16:14). The entire Godhead works in glad harmony in bringing people to faith in Christ (Jn 17:2-3).

²⁷ Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 110.

WHAT IS DOCTRINAL PREACHING?

ROBERT SMITH JR.

My definition of doctrinal preaching emphasizes its underlying aim: transformation through Christ. I state that doctrinal preaching is the escorting of the hearers into the presence of God for the purpose of transformation. I contend that the task of the doctrinal preacher is to serve as an escort who ushers the hearer into the presence of God through the proper and precise expounding of the Word of God. When this is done, the efforts of doctrinal preachers have reached their limits because they cannot transform the hearer. The hearer is left in the presence of the only one who can transform a human soul—Christ. Preachers of Christian doctrine may inform the hearer’s mind, which in turn serves to direct one to Christ, but only Christ can transform the hearer’s heart.

Doctrinal preaching is the magnifying of Jesus Christ through the explanation and application of the basic truths of the Christian faith. Doctrinal preaching must have an object. We cannot have faith in faith; we do not worship worship; and doctrine cannot exist for doctrine’s sake. Doctrinal preaching carries out the mission of magnifying Jesus Christ. To magnify Jesus Christ is not literally to make him bigger. Heaven is his throne, and the earth is his footstool. He fills the universe with his power. Rather, to magnify Christ through doctrinal preaching is to present him in such a way that the hearers see him in a more glorious, majestic, holy, sovereign, just, faithful, and mighty manner than they have ever seen him before. This is made possible when the preacher of Christian doctrine, through the power of the Spirit, explains the basic and fundamental truths of the Christian faith and shows how they apply to the Christian life. Consequently, the function of doctrinal preaching is to ferry the truths of the “was-ness” of the Word from the shore of the ancient text to the shore of the “is-ness” of our contemporary world.

FOUR KEYS FOR GIVING AN EFFECTIVE INVITATION

DERON SPOO

I had been a pastor for a full year. It was a small rural church in East Texas. Each week, I did what was expected of a young pastor still in seminary and still with much to learn about ministry. I visited in homes and in hospitals. I taught the youth group. I sat through meetings. And every Sunday I preached a message complete with an invitation to respond. The truth is I had given an invitation every Sunday for an entire year and no one had moved a muscle.

Not a single soul.

So it is no surprise that I had come to dread the conclusion of the Sunday worship gathering. I would stand there, at the head of the center aisle, awkwardly staring at four dozen or so people singing and staring back at me. I was to the point of recommending to the church leadership that we forego the invitation on Sunday morning. After all, what was the point? No one was making decisions, and it felt like no one ever would.

And then it happened! One Sunday, a young lady stepped into the aisle. She had only wanted me to pray for her, but movement had taken place! Something I said mattered to someone, and that someone had responded. To this day, I still remember her name, and the rush I felt as she stepped from the linoleum to the carpet of the center aisle.

From that Sunday on, something changed in me. Soon, other people began to populate the once barren aisle. Two children walked down wanting to be baptized. An older couple responded to join the church.

In the course of every ministry, there are certain to be seasons of plenty and seasons of want. But one thing is certain, the proclamation of the gospel message deserves and demands an opportunity to respond. In Ac 2, Peter proclaims the clear message of the life, death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Intuitively, the hearers themselves called for an invitation to action. "When they heard this, they were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles: 'Brothers, what should we do?'" (Ac 2:37)

Every sermon—whether a weekly message from the pastor or a special evangelistic event with a guest speaker—brings with it the opportunity for response. Four characteristics form the makings of an effective invitation.

1. An Invitation Should Be Given Expectantly

A well-known story of Charles Spurgeon has him speaking with a young student discouraged by the lack of any response to his sermons. Spurgeon asked, "Well, you don't expect people to respond every time you preach do you?" To which the student responded, "I suppose not." Spurgeon reportedly replied, "This is your problem and precisely why no one is responding!"

The first step to an effective invitation is one of attitude. Instead of thinking *Will anyone respond?* the mindset of the messenger must be *How can people not but respond?* And make

no mistake, this is more than the power of positive thinking. Before God will warm the heart of the hearers, the heart of the speaker must be ablaze with confidence in the God who alters people's earthly lives and eternal destinies.

Another way of saying that the invitation should be issued expectantly is to say that the invitation must be issued boldly. God is forever at work in the lives of people, often in ways we cannot see. Every person before whom the messenger speaks is created in the image of God and can be restored by the love of God through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and the power of his resurrection from the dead. Herein lies our confidence—it is the goodness of God not the grandeur of the pastor's oration which ultimately changes lives.

2. An Invitation Should Be Given Clearly

The invitation is an intimidating experience. Like any new experience, the tension is eased a bit if we know what will happen next. The pastor cannot be clear enough to provide the step-by-step of what will be faced by a person making a spiritual decision. If people are invited to walk down the aisle, the pastor owes it to the people to tell them the first thing they will hear when they are met. "What decision are you making today?" is a simple and clear question. If the invitation includes walking to an advisory room, clear directions should be given on how to get there, who will be waiting for them, and what to expect once the person arrives.

Vagueness is the enemy of decision. Lack of clarity only provides the excuse some people are looking for to delay making a pivotal spiritual decision.

But clarity is far more than logistics. What precisely are you asking people to decide? Is it church membership? Is it a recommitment of some kind? Is it salvation? Be specific. And do not fear repetition from one week to the next. People need to hear a message many, many times before it finally makes sense.

That being said, if the invitation has become anticlimactic in the scope of the full worship experience, it may be time to consider other means of issuing the invitation. The center aisle is mentioned nowhere in Acts 2. The variety of responses is limited only by the pastor's creativity and Spirit's prompting.

3. An Invitation Should Be Given Concisely

Because a spiritual leader is concerned with people's spiritual well-being (often, it seems more than they are concerned for themselves) the temptation exists to draw out the opportunity to respond longer than necessary. It takes a great deal of bravery and awareness of the moment to know when to bring an invitation to a close. As long as people are moving, the pastor has every reason to continue the time of response. However, when movement has slowed or stopped, it may be time to end the invitation.

This in itself sends a message. By not drawing out the response time, people will understand the value of this time and the importance of moving immediately on the next occasion an invitation is offered. By keeping the invitation concise, the pastor is confessing his reliance on the Holy Spirit's work and rejecting his ability to emotionally manipulate people. This requires nerve! This takes faith! This acknowledges that God works in each person's life at a unique pace.

4. Above All, the Invitation Should Be Given Faithfully

Will someone respond at your next invitation? No one knows! Likely, not even the person who will respond is yet aware that they will respond. Each moment of invitation is an adventure. Over the long-haul of summoning people to respond to the message of the gospel, the pastor is given a rare glimpse of God's patient and persistent love for people. And so, each week, the offer is made again for a restored relationship with God through Christ. At every opportunity, people are invited to a new level of surrender and commitment.

Many years ago, I found myself walking down an aisle—only in the wrong direction. I was now pastoring a much larger church in an urban environment, a far cry from rural east Texas. A person who I cared for deeply stepped clumsily into the aisle. It is traditional for the pastor to wait for the person to walk the full length of the aisle before greeting them. But reflexively, I stepped toward the person and met him half-way.

I heard a gasp in the room, though not a gasp of disgust. It was a gasp of surprise. The moment provided a picture of the heartbroken father of Luke 15 who is seen running toward his rebellious and returning son. Not content to sit in his easy chair and wait for the son to make the full trek home to present his well-rehearsed speech, the father leaps to his feet, meets his son on the road and lunges into the arms of the one he had given up as a hopeless case.

So we too have the privilege to embody God's reaching, running love for humanity. We, who have the responsibility of issuing the invitation, experience the joy of partnering with God who is forever moving toward humanity even before we budge in his direction. We participate in his patient and persistent love every time the gospel is clearly proclaimed and each time people are given the opportunity to respond.

FIVE WAYS TO IMPROVE CONGREGATIONAL SINGING

KEITH GETTY

My wife, Kristyn, and I recently returned from a tour where we had the privilege of sharing our music in cities across North America. As we do on our tours, we partnered with most of our concert sponsors to host a lunch and time of discussion with local pastors, worship leaders, and other church musicians.

In each of those leadership events, I posed the question, “What are the things you ask yourself on Monday morning, in reviewing Sunday’s services?” Generally, the responses centered around production values, stylistic issues, people management, pleasing the pastor, or finishing the service on time. I do not recall that any one asked, “How did the congregation sing?” It seems curious that in a generation that has produced innumerable conferences, articles, blogs, and even university degree programs on “worship,” the topic of congregational singing hasn’t been raised more often. But even if we had been discussing congregational participation, would we know what goal we’re aiming to hit each week?

I do not pretend to be qualified to write a theological treatise on this particular subject. Congregational singing is a holy act, and as I organize my thoughts, I hear my old pastor, Alistair Begg, reminding me that in our song worship, we have to be spiritually alive (dead people don’t sing), spiritually assisted (through the enabling of the Holy Spirit), and spiritually active (committed to daily walking with the Lord).

I offer here some practical advice on strengthening our congregational singing, drawn from both our experience as musicians and also what we have seen and learned in our travels.

1. Begin with the pastor.

Look at any congregation not engaged in worship through singing and the most consistent correlation is a senior pastor equally as disengaged. Ultimately the buck stops with him in congregational worship.

Every pastor must be intimately involved in the language being placed in the congregation’s mouth, for that singing ultimately affects how they think, how they feel, how they pray, and how they live. The congregation should be treated as those who have been invited to a feast at the table of the King; don’t hand them junk food! C. S. Lewis believed singing completes our faith, explaining in his book *Reflections on the Psalms*, “I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.”²⁸ This is why I believe many of our pastoral heroes such as Martin Luther, Charles Spurgeon, J. C. Ryle, and Philip Schaaf produced hymn books in addition to preaching and teaching. Other leaders such as Horatius Bonar, Richard Baxter, and John Calvin wrote hymns themselves.

Pastors not only have a duty to be involved in preparing for the time of congregational singing, they also have a responsibility to personally model and demonstrate the importance of

²⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (San Diego, Ca: Harcourt, 1958), 95.

it. We need pastors who constantly delight in their congregation's singing and the musicians who serve them and who also joyfully and authentically participate themselves.

Pastors, take up your duty in this act of worship called congregational singing. Worship leaders, pray for your pastor faithfully and do your part to develop a thriving relationship with him. The most influential worship leaders in history have almost always had close (though often tense) relationships with their pastors.

2. Sing great songs.

If congregational singing is a holy act, and if we are what we sing, then we can't be lazy in selecting songs. We must sing great songs—songs that artfully exult Christ with deeply meaningful lyrics and melodies we can't wait to sing. Better to have a small repertoire of great songs (that you will sing well) than a catalog full of songs recycled for sentimental reasons or chased after because they are the "latest" thing.

Writing or selecting great songs is not an exercise in lyrical propaganda or marketing. It is not merely laying scriptural truth alongside any melody. It is an art form that arrests our emotions and intellect in mysterious ways. Just as a master chef selects ingredients that are at the same time nutritious, aromatic, and flavorful, the selection of songs for congregational singing must excite at a number of levels.

Great songs have stood the test of time. They have been passed on to us from our fathers, and we should pass them along to our children. Assemble any Christian group, and practically everyone can join you in singing "Amazing Grace" confidently and passionately. We're drawn to sing great music, much like we're drawn to stand in awe of a beautiful painting.

There are great new songs—they breathe fresh air into our singing and help connect age-old truth with modern sounds. These are appropriate, too, though harder to find.

Recently I invited two unbelieving friends to a Christian event. The artists on stage played songs with interesting lyrics but awful melodies. I asked my friends what they thought about the concert. "These people obviously don't take their subject matter very seriously," one friend replied. Now, I know for a fact this is not true. But art ultimately expresses life, and low-quality songs do not reflect spirited, serious believers.

3. Cultivate a congregation-centered priority in those who lead.

From the individual who leads music, to the worship teams standing up front, to those of us who follow as members of the congregation, it's vital to build a culture where everyone realizes our corporate responsibility before God and to each other is to sing together. Throughout Scripture, the command to sing is given to God's people more than four hundred times. Ephesians 5:19 instructs believers to address one another in "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." Week after week, we are spiritually renewed, realigned, and sanctified by singing to the Lord and singing to each other as the body of Christ.

Sadly, some of the churches with the newest facilities and most forward-thinking pastors are weakened substantially by lackluster congregational singing. It is an awful witness for outsiders to watch believers so disinterested in singing to their Creator and Redeemer.

Many of our common challenges—the overly exuberant drummer, the diva-like background vocalist, the subversive choir member, or an unhealthy priority on performance—can be corrected when we teach and encourage those involved in our music to be excited about using their many rich and colorful gifts for the purpose of supporting the congregation. Every singer, instrumentalist, and choir member should share in facilitating the high calling of congregational singing.

4. Serve the congregation through musical excellence.

Scripture often commands us to make music that is both good and excellent. For example, Psalm 33 tells us both to “sing . . . with a joyful shout” and also play our instruments “skillfully” (v. 3). This instruction is consistent with our calling as believers to work heartily at whatever we do, as “for the Lord and not for people” (Col 3:23). The music need not be complex or style-specific, but we must take seriously our role in such holy activity. This leadership requires people who are trained and well-prepared. As with all work that involves creativity (whether preaching, mothering, or running a business), we should constantly seek to be fresh, interesting, and connected with our congregations. Listen to new music, arrangements, and sounds. Examine our heritage of liturgies for insight to ordering the song service. Reach across the aisle, meeting with leaders from different churches and denominations to learn about their music selections.

In scoring for films, the composer and performers use all of their musical excellence in service of the story. In similar fashion, the singers and musicians should bring to bear their musical excellence in service of the congregation. There is no dichotomy between musical excellence and congregational worship provided the excellence is given in service of the congregation.

5. Manage the congregation’s repertoire intentionally.

Having progressed in each of the areas above and putting them into regular practice in services, be intentional about what is sung and when. Don’t treat your library of congregational choices like selecting “shuffle” on your iPod. Instead, be intentional in ordering the service, heeding Eric Alexander’s caution that congregational praise begins with God and his glory, not man and his need. Ask why you are singing at a given point in the service, and be sure that the selection for that moment is appropriate. Also, learn from the rich heritage of liturgy and how it provides a pathway of ordering songs for a service.

And finally...

Why not begin the Monday morning review by asking, “How did the congregation sing?” and, “How can we help them do it better?” Starting here, we may find that the other questions begin to resolve themselves.

Daily struggles are expected in the Christian life. We encounter temptations, we get stuck in sin, grief abounds, and we are always confronted with difficult decisions that require wisdom. We are, indeed, people who need daily help for our souls.

Pastors, of course, were never intended to carry the burden of pastoral care by themselves. Before Christ, priests and prophets were the go-to counselors, but now the task is dispersed among all God's people. Pastors are called "[to equip] the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12). Most prominent among this ministry and building up is the way we care for one another's souls.

God's Word gives insight into the nature and care of the soul we could never have apart from his revelation. Our approach should capture both the tone and content of the great themes of Scripture. Everything we say should sound better than what anyone could imagine. Our care for each other should go deep yet be elegantly simple.

So, how can we build a culture of care in our churches?

Acknowledge our own neediness. The best preparation for helping others is to be helped. As we follow Jesus, the church culture aspires to humility, and the most practical way for us to express that is to know our own neediness and ask for help.

Nothing could be clearer. We are created, finite, limited in our abilities, sinners, and sufferers. We need the Lord, and we need one another, every day. This is so fundamental to life with Christ that we could define faith as,

"I need Jesus." But it's harder than it seems.

Our corporate goal then is to express Psalm-like neediness to the Lord, and, with that, to ask someone to pray for us. Perhaps we need help with a difficult relationship, power to battle temptation, or to love children with wisdom. That is impossible apart from the Spirit's work of humility. But imagine a church in which members ask someone for prayer, every day. That alone could change our church culture.

Love wisely. Equipped with the Spirit and humility, we realize others also need us. God has been pleased to use the ordinary care of ordinary people to bring extraordinary growth and change in our lives (see 1Co 1:20–2:10). So we participate by taking the initiative and moving with love toward brothers, sisters, and neighbors.

Once there, we simply ask: How are you? What could be simpler, yet so important? We will hear about events from the week; we are especially eager to hear how those events affected the person. We listen for joys or sorrows. With the joys, we rejoice and enjoy them together. With the sorrows, we pray. We try to match life with Scripture and consider together what God says to us, and we pray.

Imagine that kind of lively interdependence happening after a church service or in a small group. Imagine people moving toward each other, with a special interest in the visitor, the marginalized, the isolated. Imagine people smiling, enjoying one another, being grieved together and praying then and there.

Once we pray for someone, that person is lodged into our hearts. We can't help but follow up in a day or a week and ask what God is doing. Not many have experienced that kind of love and care. When we receive it, we are inspired to go even deeper in sharing our hearts, and we are inspired to move into the lives of others.

It is through these small steps of neediness and love, by ordinary people, our churches become an attractive light to the world.

If Jesus Christ came into the world to save us from our sins and give us the gift of eternal life, then why doesn't God take us to heaven the moment we trust Christ as our Lord and Savior? Many answers might be given to this question, of course—but they all come down to this: God leaves us here because he has a mission for us to fulfill. We aren't here by accident; neither are we here simply to enjoy the good things life has to offer. We are here because God put us here, and he has a sovereign purpose in keeping us here. It's true for us as individuals, and it's true for his body, the church, in all of its fullness. As Jesus prayed just before his arrest and trial, "I am not praying that you take them out of the world . . . As you sent me into the world, I also have sent them into the world" (Jn 17:15,18).

But what is the mission we're sent to accomplish? What does God want his people to do?

We will never understand his mission unless we understand his revealed Word, the Bible. Apart from it we will flounder around, never understanding his mission for us and therefore never fulfilling it. Yet from one end of the Bible to the other we see God's plan at work, and our first task must be to understand it.

Apart from the Bible we will never comprehend the depth of human sin, and the horror of what it has done to the entire human race. Because of our rebellion against God, we have been cut off from the very One who created us, and have become subject instead to death and judgment and hell. Beyond that, our lives have been twisted and marred by sin's terrible tyranny over us and over all human society. The Scripture's words are true: "There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away; all alike have become worthless" (Rm 3:10-12a).

But apart from the Bible we'll also never understand the depth of God's love! We can say "God loves you." We may even think we feel his love from time to time in our hearts—but what is the proof? The proof is in the Bible's message of the cross. In the cross we see God's love demonstrated in all of its fullness and depth, for at the cross God himself, in the person of his only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, took upon himself the judgment that we deserve. As the Bible says, "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his one and only Son into the world so that we might live through him" (1Jn 4:9). By his resurrection Jesus demonstrated beyond all doubt that he was indeed the Savior, sent into the world to save us from our sins and give us the gift of eternal life. And some day he will come again to conquer all evil and establish his eternal rule over all creation.

This is the message God has given us—a life-changing message that our sick and confused world desperately needs. We need to understand it . . . we need to submit our lives to it . . . and we need to share it in every way we possibly can. God did not intend for his church—his people—to be just another social club, or a community that is concerned only with its own survival or power or internal welfare. We are called to be his instruments—his feet, his hands, his voice, his welcoming arms—in penetrating our world with the good news of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ.

Jesus's final command to his followers has never been rescinded, nor will it ever become outdated or unimportant or irrelevant: "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:18-20).

This is why evangelism must be our continual priority, and this is why discipleship must be our goal. We are under divine orders, and our only logical response must be obedience. But more than that, we are under a divine compulsion—a compulsion born of love. How can we remain indifferent to those around us who are living every day of their lives "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12)? How can we remain indifferent to a world that is torn by war and injustice and racism and famine and poverty and disease?

Paul's words must become ours: "For the love of Christ compels us, since we have reached this conclusion: If one died for all, then all died. And he died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the one who died for them and was raised... Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf: 'Be reconciled to God'" (2Co 5:14-15,20).

Let God's Word, the Bible, saturate your soul every day. Let its message of hope and freedom from sin change you into the person God wants you to be—a person who reflects Christ in all you think and do and say. And then let that message send you to your knees in prayer for a dying world, and let it send you in the power of the Holy Spirit to tell others that there can be hope . . . there can be new life . . . there can be forgiveness . . . and there can be heaven before us because of Jesus Christ, the only Savior of the world.

And in that day when we stand before him, may we not be ashamed, but may we hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Mt 25:23).

A note to pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and Sunday school teachers on how to have an evangelistic culture in your church.

An evangelistic crusade or outreach is like a “shot in the arm,” a catalyst to rally the troops, a call to battle. But the ongoing work of evangelism happens in churches. In fact, what’s needed in our churches today is an evangelistic culture.

This is not something that happens naturally; it happens supernaturally. Things always default to mediocrity—never to quality. That’s true of businesses, restaurants, stores, and even the church. If you see quality, and life, and an evangelistic culture, it is there because of effort. And that effort starts with you as the pastor or ministry leader. You cannot take people any further than you yourself have gone. As Paul told Timothy, the farmer that labors must first be a partaker of the fruit (see 2 Tm 2:6).

How Can You Have an Evangelistic Culture in Your Church?

1. Begin in the Pulpit

If there is a mist in the pulpit, there will be a fog in the pews. C. H. Spurgeon once said: “The Holy Spirit will move them by first moving you. If you can rest without their being saved, they will rest too. But if you are filled with an agony for them, if you cannot bear that they should be lost, you will soon find that they are uneasy too. I hope you will get into such a state that you will dream about your child or your hearer perishing for lack of Christ, and start up at once and begin to cry, ‘O God, give me converts or I die!’ Then you will have converts.”²⁹

2. Articulate the Gospel

You might say, “But I’m a pastor, not an evangelist!” That may be true, but Paul told Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist” (2Tm 4:5). You need to specifically break down the gospel and explain it to people. Try to imagine that you are a nonbeliever hearing it for the first time. Use language a person will understand. When I do this, I will not speak to them in a “preaching voice” but a more conversational one—as though I were speaking to them one-on-one.

I say something like, “You may have joined our service today as a visitor. Let me say first of all we are so glad you are here. We have been talking about (fill in the blank here for whatever your topic was). But you may not yet have this personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Let me break it down for you right now.” Then I will share the gospel.

There are certain elements that must be in play for the gospel to be the gospel. We need to tell people they are separated from God by sin, that Jesus died for that sin, and that if they repent and turn to him, they can be saved. Our message is “Christ and him crucified.”

Paul said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation” (Rm 1:16). There is power in the simple message of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

²⁹ Charles Spurgeon, *Sermons Preached and Revised*, 143-44.

You need to start giving invitations for people to come to Christ. This takes a commitment, because there is always the possibility of failure. But there is an even greater possibility of success. It's worth the risk. At the end of your message should be an evangelistic "hook." No matter what the topic, there is always a way to wrap it up evangelistically. The key is to transition to the cross. Preach this part of your message with urgency, "as a dying man to dying men." You must trust that God will bless his Word and convict people of sin.

When Peter was preaching on the day of Pentecost, they were "pierced to the heart," and they asked, "What should we do?" (Ac 2:37). In verses 38-39, Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

Like Peter, you must be intentional in your invitation, preaching for a decision.

3. Be Clear in Your Invitation

This is where it breaks down for most preachers. I have heard pastors and speakers give excellent messages with a call to Christ. Then it all falls apart in "the mechanics" of it. People do not understand what you are asking them to do.

By the way, there are many ways to go about calling someone to Christ. There are a lot of ways to ask people to respond to your invitation. You can have people stand up and pray, you can have them pray with you and then send them to a room for follow-up, you can have them come forward to the front and lead them in prayer. The main thing is that we call them to Christ. There needs to be a "moment of decision." We don't have the specifics of an invitation in Scripture, but we have many instances of people repenting and believing in large numbers.

4. Have a Follow-up System in Place

I'm talking about counselors who have been trained to encourage new believers. If a church does not have a follow-up ministry for new converts, something is not right. A church that does not have a constant flow of new believers will stagnate. New converts are the lifeblood of the church. We have a choice: evangelize or fossilize.

The early church—the church that changed the world—had a constant flow of new converts. Ac 2:46-47 tells us, "Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with joyful and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

5. Start and Maintain an Evangelistic Culture

People always return to mediocrity, so you must not let this culture die. A crusade or rally can help, but ongoing evangelism is something you must do in your church. Your people must invite others to church! In almost all cases, new converts at our crusades end up in the church of the person who brought them.

FIVE STEPS TO START & KEEP AN EVANGELISTIC CULTURE

GREG LAURIE

If you just announce an evangelistic outreach event and put out invitations, you might see some growth. But if you urge and exhort your people to bring nonbelievers, it will grow.

If you are thinking, "That just won't work in our church!" then change the culture of your church so it will. Do a series on the importance of sharing one's faith. My experience has taught me that the presentation of the gospel followed by an invitation to receive Christ can be effective in a multitude of environments and settings.

Let's all pray for an evangelistic culture in our churches.

HOW DO YOU DISCIPLE OTHERS?

DANIEL IM

When was the last time you reflected on the way that you personally disciple others? Are you more of a teacher or a shepherd? Do you like to take people through formal curriculum, or do you use their life situation as the starting point? Do you like to disciple one-on-one, in triads, in small groups, or in classrooms? When are people most apt to change? What role do the Holy Spirit, Scripture, and prayer play in the discipleship process?

Unless you have intentionally spent time studying the way people learn and different methods for discipleship, you probably disciple others the way you were disciplined (or in the exact opposite manner). This is because our natural bias is to start with what we already know and have personally experienced.

If you are a parent, have you ever caught yourself saying or doing something to your children that your parents use to say or do to you? I catch myself doing this all the time. When my children are not listening, I just begin counting down from the number five. It's not like my parents told me this is what I should do, but it's what they did to me, and it worked. When I stop to think about it, I don't even feel like this is the best method for discipline; in fact, my wife, Christina, and I agree that it's not! But I often catch myself still doing it because of that natural bias. Our natural bias is to teach the way that we have been taught, and lead the way that we have been led, unless we make a conscious effort to change. In other words, until you reexamine the way you approach discipleship, you will naturally revert back to using the methods that others used to disciple you. This is not necessarily a bad thing, since you may have been disciplined by some of the best deacons, elders, pastors, and small group leaders. But until you take a step back and realize why they did what they did, you will consistently hit a glass ceiling and have a hard time growing in the way you disciple others.

Discipleship is not about a transfer of information, nor is it about behavior modification. No amount of knowledge or list of do's and don'ts have the power to change one's heart. After all, wasn't it the prophet Jeremiah who wrote, "The heart is more deceitful than anything else, and incurable—who can understand it?" (Jr 17:9).

As much as our hearts are damaged and diseased because of sin, it's amazing that through the same prophet, Jeremiah, the Lord revealed that "the days are coming . . . when I will make a new covenant" (Jr 31:31). Through this new covenant brought about by Jesus Christ, "I will put my teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Jr 31:33). The Lord declared the same thing through the prophet Ezekiel, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will place my Spirit within you and cause you to follow my statutes and carefully observe my ordinances" (Ezk 36:26-27).

From one discipler to another, and from one church leader to another, we need to commit ourselves to relying wholeheartedly on the transforming power of Christ, as well as continually growing in the way that we disciple, teach, and lead others towards Christlikeness, "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness" (Eph 4:13).

There are many ways to do student ministry. God has shaped you as a leader with specific passions, thoughts, and talents that are different from others. There are also contextual elements to how each of you do student ministry in your setting. You should do student ministry differently from others; there is no cookie-cutter model.

However, I believe there is one thing that all student pastors must do. In Ezekiel 33 we see a conversation between God and Ezekiel where God establishes Ezekiel as a “watchman” over his people. The watchman was a very common role in the lives of people in that day from a city defense perspective. The role of the watchman was to stand on the wall of a city, watch for danger, and blow a trumpet to warn the people of the city if an enemy army was approaching. For Ezekiel, as a watchman over God’s people, his role was to take the words that God gave him and speak them to the people. In Acts 18 and 20 we see that Paul uses similar language to this passage in Ezekiel and sees himself in a watchman kind of role in the New Testament.

So what is the one thing that all student pastors must do? What, in essence, is the role of a student pastor? It is to be a watchman. It is to sound the alarm to this generation of teenagers just as Ezekiel and Paul sounded the alarm to the people of their time. Here are some specific things that we need to sound the alarm about:

Sound the alarm of God’s plan of salvation. Unashamedly proclaim the message of the gospel to your students. Draw a straight line to the cross in every message that you give. Remember the role of the watchman from Ezekiel. When the watchman saw an enemy army approaching they were to blow a trumpet. A trumpet is a piercing, loud, interrupting sound. It was meant to cut through all other noise in the city to get the attention of the people. When we preach the gospel it is meant to cut through all of the other noise in the life of a student. Proclaim it boldly and clearly. Be the trumpet blast in the life of a student.

Sound the alarm of God’s grace. Students must understand God’s grace. They must understand that following Jesus isn’t about being a good little Christian boy or girl; that it isn’t about adhering to a list of do’s and don’ts. It isn’t about trying, but about dying (Gl 2:20) and living in the power of Jesus. When students (and everyone else) place their faith in him they are declared holy, righteous, faultless, blameless before God. Your students need to understand what it means to live in what God has already declared them to be, rather than trying to live a “good life” in an attempt to pay Jesus back for the sacrifice he made. There are no shortcuts to this. The way they learn to live in grace is to spend time staring at Jesus through God’s Word. Students will be transformed into the image that they stare at most. Make sure that they are starting at what matters — Jesus (2Co 3:18).

Sound the alarm to call the next generation of watchmen. Part of your role as a student pastor is to train and equip your students to be a watchman for their schools, neighborhoods, teams, clubs, and homes. This isn’t a role for students to step into one day when they are older, rather, it is one that students can fulfill right now. Give them opportunities to lead right now in your ministry. When students don’t have that opportunity while they’re in the student ministry, their leadership growth is greatly prohibited and they are less likely to lead as an adult.

THE ONE THING YOU MUST DO AS A STUDENT PASTOR

BEN TRUEBLOOD

One reality of student ministry is that if students are equipped to be a watchman as a student, they are more likely to make an impact as a teenager and less likely to leave the church when they graduate.

There are many things that you can do as a student pastor, and many of them are valuable. There is one thing that you must do as a student pastor: Be a watchman for the students that God has appointed to you to lead. Be the trumpet blast of the gospel in the lives of your students.

Perhaps the biggest mission field in your church are the children among you. Research tells us seven out of ten kids will end up walking away from the church after they turn eighteen. About five of those seven will return when they have families of their own one day, but two will never come back. There is an urgency to reach kids with the gospel. Help equip your staff, teachers, families and congregation to know how to share the gospel with kids in a way that truly connects them to the saving power of Christ. Use this language as a tool along with provided Scriptures to help guide your conversations with children and their families:

God rules. The Bible tells us God created everything, including you and me. God is in charge—of everything—there is nothing that is outside of his control (Gn 1:1; Col 1:16-17; Rv 4:11).

We sinned—every single one of us. Since the time of Adam and Eve, every person that has ever lived has chosen to disobey God. The Bible calls this sin. Because God is holy, God cannot be around sin. Sin separates us from God and deserves God's punishment of death. That's bad news (Rm 3:23; 6:23).

God provided a solution to our sin problem. God loved us so much that he sent his Son, Jesus, to rescue us from the punishment our sin deserves. That's something we, as sinners, could never earn or do on our own. Jesus alone saves us from our sin. That's good news (Jn 3:16; Eph 2:8-9)!

Jesus gives. Jesus lived a perfect life, died on the cross for our sins, and rose from the grave. He's still alive today! Because Jesus gave up his life for us, we can be welcomed into God's family now and forever. This is the best gift, ever (Rm 5:8; 2Co 5:21; 1Pt 3:18).

We respond. We can receive the gift of salvation that Jesus offers us. The Bible tells us exactly how to do it! The letters A, B and C can help us remember how God wants us to respond to his good news (Rm 10:9-10,13).

ABC stands for **Admit, Believe, and Confess.**

First, **ADMIT** to God that you are a sinner. The Bible says we all are sinners, and that we need to repent. To repent means to turn around, to change direction, to turn away from your sin—tell God you're sorry for your sins, and trust him to forgive you.

Second, **BELIEVE** that Jesus Christ is God's Son and receive his gift of forgiveness from sin.

Third, **CONFESS** your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. That means that you tell God and others that you've trusted Jesus to be your Savior and to be in charge of your life.

Admit that you are a sinner.

Believe that Jesus is God's Son,

and Confess that he is your Savior and Lord.

SHARING THE GOSPEL WITH CHILDREN

JANA MAGRUDER

The ABCs can help you remember how to become a Christian, but trusting in Jesus as your Lord and Savior is an important decision, and is very personal between you and God. If you want to know more about this decision, talk to your mom, or your dad, or a grandparent, or a teacher, or your pastor. I know any of them would love to help you understand more about what it means to receive God's gift of forgiveness from sin and to receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

Matt Chandler serves as lead pastor of teaching at The Village Church in Flower Mound, Texas. “A Brief Biblical Theology of Leadership” (co-authored with Eric Geiger and Josh Patterson) is adapted from *Creature of the Word: The Jesus-Centered Church* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 159-63.

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Charles Spurgeon, the famous nineteenth century Baptist preacher, served as the pastor of Metropolitan Tabernacle in London for thirty-eight years.

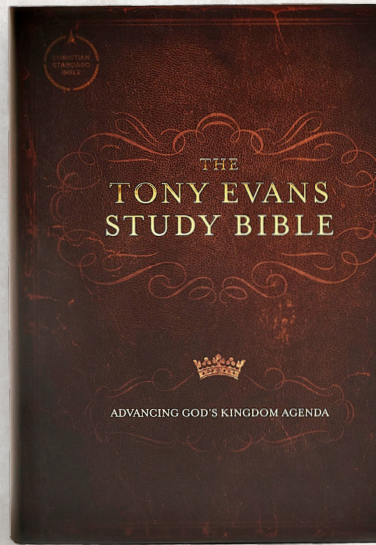
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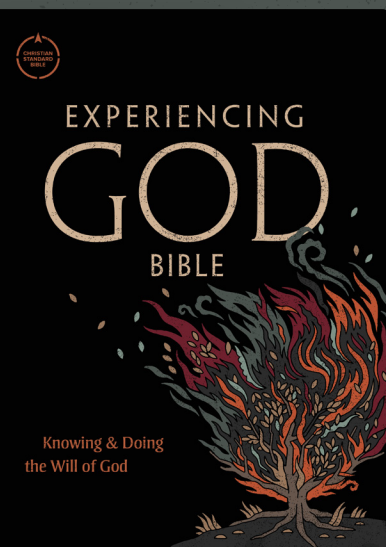
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