

IX 9Marks

HOW SCRIPTURE BRINGS LIFE
AND GROWTH TO GOD'S PEOPLE

WORD



CENTERED

CHURCH

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FOREWORD BY MATT CHANDLER



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THE WORD

Frees

It's hard to maintain faith in the power of God's Word.

How many times have I explained the good news of Jesus Christ to friends and strangers and then watched them do nothing.

How many times have I stepped into the pulpit, my heart blooming with joy over the biblical text, preached my guts out, and then received only well-mannered "thank yous" from courteous faces moving quickly toward the door.

How many times have I found my own heart deadened to Scripture.

Faith is difficult because the operations of God's Word are not visible to the eyes. So pastors spend week after week in their studies hunched over new and older books, and year after year in the pulpit filling their mouths with God's even older words. But then they look out and see the same old faces staring back at them. They wonder why nothing seems to change. Some walk back to their offices, glance out the window, and watch as cranes half a mile away build the 5,000-seat auditorium for the trendy new church with large video screens and boy bands. You can almost hear the sigh.

GOD'S WORD AND SOMETHING MORE

I recently heard about the pastors of one church who have struggled to maintain such faith in God's Word. Historically, these leaders were known for their commitment to the primacy of expositional preaching. They would stand up to read and preach the Bible with reverence, and a hush would come over the congregation. Ears would perk up. Fidgeting would stop.

But then something changed. They became discouraged by the lack of growth, and so they began a second service geared to a younger generation. The pastors changed their hair and clothes between services. More gel? More spike?

More significantly, the church "lost its hush" whenever God's Word was read. That's how one departing member put it. Another departing member, himself known for stylish attire, grieved that the leaders began to confuse tattoos with "authenticity." Both of these members, like many others, left to find a church where God's Word was central.

On the one hand, it's easy to be sympathetic with the pastors. The apostle Paul said he would "become all things to all people" (1 Cor. 9:22), which some not surprisingly interpret as a mandate to dress, speak, sing, and even design buildings according to the customs of the people. These pastors, no doubt, had observed a number of generational changes and lovingly wanted to reach both a younger and an older crowd. I have no problem with hair gel or trendy shirts, and I certainly have no problem with big churches. May God fill all our churches!

What concerns me about this kind of scenario, however, is a possible lack of faith. There is an underlying assumption that God's Word alone "didn't work." It wasn't sufficient and needed a little help. The girl can't get a date wearing that plain old dress, so buy her something pretty and add more makeup.

We need to be careful about interpreting Paul's words to make

him sound like a modern-day niche marketer. I understand why magazine publishers, car companies, and clothing retailers adjust their marketing campaigns to suit the natural appetites of various kinds of groups. It works. It gains customers. But does God really need to attract sinners in the same way?

Paul commended being all things to all men, but his point was that we should be willing to sacrifice personal preferences rather than cause people to stumble in spiritual matters. That's not the same thing as trying to gain hearers with designer jeans.

Furthermore, notice what happens when we try to "reach out" using such devices: Christ's people divide generationally, culturally, and ethnically. Lowering the walls for one group will raise them for another.

Now, having begun somewhat critically, let me admit there is a real conversation to have about the relationship between God's Word and other things Christians use in ministry. Even if we grant that God's Word working through God's Spirit is uniquely powerful to create spiritual life, how do we relate Word ministry and deed ministry, like hospitality or caring for the poor? How important is the style of music in a church, or a preacher's style of clothes? What about a preacher's charisma or sense of humor? How important is the church building?

Before we can answer these questions, we need to look at what happens when the electric current of God's Word and Spirit enters the ears and makes its way through the individual person. Once we see what the Word and Spirit alone can do to give life and freedom to the individual, we will be in a better position to understand what role is played by music or good deeds or ethnic identity or even spiky hair. Those are the two goals of this chapter: Consider what the Word does when encountering the human heart, and then compare this with other aspects of ministry.

BRIAN'S RISKY TRIPS

Before he joined my church, Brian surrendered almost a decade of his life to drug addiction. He took routine 2:00 a.m. trips with friends to a rough area of Baltimore to buy drugs—sometimes cocaine, sometimes heroin, sometimes marijuana. The trips were risky. He had seen a number of friends beat up or arrested. So while his friends drove, he would sit quietly in the backseat, praying under his breath that God would protect him. Brian's parents had taught him the gospel, and he had made a profession of faith himself. But now he was sunk into full-time addiction.

He said of the drug runs, "I was petrified. But it was never enough for me to tell them to pull over and get out of the car. I couldn't break the addiction." So he would pray, "God, I know this is wrong, but let me get out of the city tonight without getting beat up, without getting robbed, or worse."

The picture of Brian praying on the way to get drugs strikes me for two reasons. First, I can identify with it. I'm a sinner. I've never been addicted to drugs, but I've been addicted to other sins, like pride or vanity. I know what it is to choose something even while I know it's harming me. Second, it's a perfect picture of the enslavement of sin. You know better than to say yes to a temptation, but you grab it anyway.

THE ENSLAVED HEART

Sin is indeed an enslaver. It binds the heart to wanting the wrong things. It convinces the heart that God's truth is a lie, and that sin offers greater pleasure than God.

The frightening thing is, we're all born slaves to sin. As Jesus put it, "I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (John 8:34 NIV). From birth, that's all of us.

This metaphor of slavery is worth meditating on. Picture

yourself as a slave. A chain is around your neck. Your owner holds the other end of the chain. He can pull you wherever he wants to go, and you cannot do otherwise.

According to the Bible, sin doesn't place its chain around your neck but around your heart—its affections, desires, and beliefs. And it's not someone else holding the chain. It's you! It's your own sinful nature. Apart from Christ, your sinful nature owns you, requiring your will to move whichever way it pleases. You want what your sinful nature *wants*. Every time. All the time.

Our deepest problem isn't located in our will, as if to say the root problem is that we keep *choosing* wrong things. Our problem is located in our nature, which is corrupt and sinful. Our will then follows our nature. So just as an apple tree bears apples according to its nature, and a lion wills to eat meat according to its nature, so a sinner wills sin according to his or her nature.

What's a sinful nature? It's a nature curved in on itself, Augustine said (see Rom. 7:15–19). It has deposed God as God. It's unable to acknowledge that God deserves His throne, because it's convinced it belongs in His chair. Now, the sinful nature might “believe in God” and decide to keep Him around for useful employment, like getting one out of tight spots. The sinful nature might even attempt to obey God's law as a way of proving that one's as good as He is. The point is, the sinful nature is utterly unable to love God more than oneself, to desire God's glory, and to joyfully embrace His rule. You might as well ask an apple tree to bear oranges, or a lion to eat grass. Here's how Paul puts it: “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot” (Rom. 8:7).

Heavy words, those. “It cannot.”

“The heart wants what it wants,” said Woody Allen when asked why he had committed adultery. We want what we want, and we *cannot* want otherwise. That's the essence of our slavery.

WHAT CANNOT FREE THE HEART

This “cannot” of our slavery is worth meditating on because churches need to know what they’re up against. (It would be just as valuable to meditate on other biblical metaphors for describing our spiritual condition like “dead” or “blind” or “deaf.” But we’ll stick with the metaphor of slavery for now.) They are not up against the need to *change people’s minds* about God, like a political campaign tries to change the public’s mind about a candidate, or a marketing campaign tries to change people’s minds about a product. Otherwise it would make sense for churches to mimic the methods of political and marketing campaigns.

But do we not in fact see churches attracting people with the right style of clothes and music? Don’t people flock to winsome preachers? Among the intellectual crowd, aren’t the gentler rhythms and ancient aesthetic of a high church liturgy proving powerful? Sure. But none of this requires a change of nature.

When we’re dealing with changing a sinful nature, we’re dealing with something categorically different. It’s like asking a leopard to change its spots (Jer. 13:23). Or a bad tree to bear good fruit (Luke 6:43–44). What humans need is not a change of mind about God, but a change of nature. They need to be born again, given spiritual sight, set free. Style can’t do that. Law and good deeds can’t do that. Music and liturgy cannot do that, at least apart from the words of the gospel. We need something not with natural power but divine power. Paul writes, “For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:3–4).

What’s strange is, you can “talk theology” with church leaders, and many will acknowledge everything I just said about our enslavement to sin and the depth of our problem as fallen sinners. But turn the conversation to local church practices, and that

earlier conversation gets left behind. They begin to talk about reaching out with the right style of music, liturgy, or dimming the lights to create the right worship effect. They readily adopt the devices of the marketing firm or the political campaign, even though such devices are utterly powerless to change the nature of the heart.

WHAT CAN FREE THE HEART?

What frees an enslaved heart? Only one thing: the truth of God's Word working with the Holy Spirit. As Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). The truth comes, and the Spirit enlivens the heart toward that truth. He electrifies what's dead. He gives the heart "eyes" to see it (Eph. 1:18), as well as the ability to recognize its significance, to value it properly, and to love it. The person is now free, because his heart is now properly conformed to God's truth.

Picture the operations of God's Word like DNA replacement therapy, as if your nature had "bad DNA" that could somehow be replaced with "good DNA." Or think of reprogramming a corrupted computer. The old computer coding constantly crashes the computer; it needs to be reprogrammed. This is what God's truth does for a person's nature, heart, and will—it replaces the bad DNA or bad coding with good. The person is now free to operate as he or she was designed to operate. Love and good works begin to abound.

This confrontation between truth and untruth is where the decisive battle happens for heart change. Untruth can only be defeated and replaced through a confrontation with Truth. Here's how the story goes: It begins with a sham king sitting upon a sham throne, convinced that all glory and rule are his. That's all of us in our fallen nature. Then an ambassador for the real king enters the

cardboard throne room and speaks a simple word: “The real king is coming. He’s willing to forgive. Surrender.”

This is the all-important moment. This is where the battle is won or lost. Truth is staring Untruth in the face, and everyone watching wants to know: Will the sham king listen or won’t he? If the Spirit electrifies his ears, eyes, and heart so that he can hear, see, and love, then, yes, he will listen, repent, and believe. He’ll climb out of his paper chair and bow with unfeigned love and worship (see Phil. 3:3). If the Spirit doesn’t, then he won’t. Period.

Suppose, however, the ambassador decides to soften the real king’s words. He doesn’t tell the sham king to surrender. He tells him instead that he can offer him “a great opportunity for an alliance” with the true king. Meanwhile, he plays a little mood music. He tells sweet stories. He does everything he can to flatter the imposter. Would the ambassador make any progress this way? Maybe. He might even get this pathetic and naked emperor to declare himself a friend of the real king. Of course, the whole affair would only reinforce the sham because there would be no real surrender. The ambassador will have succeeded only in creating a *nominal* Christian.

Only the power of God’s Word and Spirit can give true freedom—the freedom of obedience, the freedom of righteousness, the freedom of joyful conformity to the character of God (see Rom. 6–8). After all, only the Word and Spirit can replace one nature with another. They destroy the old and create the new. Their power is awesome. They pulverize the hard heart like a massive asteroid colliding with a planet. Paul could, therefore, say to a group of Christians, “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed” (Rom. 6:17; also 1 Peter 2:16).

PRIORITY OF SPIRIT-FILLED WORD MINISTRY

If the individual heart is freed and given life exclusively through the Word, then priority in the local church must go to Word ministry—sharing the Word, preaching the Word, singing the Word, reading the Word, and praying the Word. Whether a “high” or “low church” liturgy, the Word is what counts.

This is Paul’s conclusion in 2 Corinthians after comparing the Spiritless old covenant with a Spirit-filled new covenant. Where the Spirit of Christ is present, Paul says, “There is freedom” (3:17). The Spirit transforms fallen sinners into the image of Christ as they behold Christ’s face and become free (3:18). But how do they see Christ’s face? They see with their ears. Paul writes:

We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but *by the open statement of the truth* we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. (4:2, emphasis added)

Christians and church leaders must set forth God’s truth plainly. If people reject this truth, it’s not because of inadequate market research. They reject it for other reasons:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. (4:3–5)

Paul knows that any rejection of his message is a spiritual matter. People reject Christ’s lordship because they remain firmly

ensconced on their paper thrones. Their hearts are darkened and blind to God's reality. The good news is, the Spirit comes and changes hearts through "open-statement-of-the-truth" ministry. He frees them by creating them anew.

Paul continues: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (4:6).

Let there be light! Bang! A whole new universe. A whole new creation. A whole new nature. *That's* the power needed to free sinners.

Strangely, church leaders get caught up in all kinds of power for building their churches: the power of ethnic and cultural affinity, the power of entertainment, the power of rhetoric and humor, the power of good organizational principles, and so much more. But does any power in the universe match God's power to breathe out worlds or dismiss death simply with words? "Let there be light!" and "Lazarus, come forth!"? No; there is nothing like it. Yet this same power is available to the preacher through God's Word. This is why people get converted when listening to anonymous radio broadcasts, or even listening to hypocritical preachers who preach "in pretense" (Phil. 1:18). Relying on anything else indicates a dramatic failure to recognize how radically new the new creation is.

WHAT ABOUT EVERYTHING ELSE?

But surely we don't want to license hypocritical preaching. A preacher's life must play some role, right? What role?

This brings us to our second main topic for our chapter: How do we understand the relationship between the Word's unique power and the host of other factors that seem to play a role in a ministry's outward success? For instance, some preachers have greater natural gifts of charisma, humor, or eloquence than

others. Even the Bible acknowledges this (see Acts 18:24; 2 Cor. 8:18). Why then does it seem that such preachers yield a greater harvest if indeed the Word works by supernatural power? Also, how should we regard the seeker-sensitive or contextualizing impulse to “meet people where they’re at” with the right style of music, dress, or building décor? And how important are deed ministries like hospitality and caring for the poor relative to the Word ministries of preaching and evangelism?

Some church leaders say that *deed ministry* is no less important than *Word ministry*. Both are needed like a bird needs two wings to fly.

I’m grateful for the renewed emphasis on good works and other elements. But we still need to respect the unique role of God’s Word in creating new life and setting captives free.

A PLATFORM FOR THE WORD

Most of the things mentioned above provide an opportunity for the Word to do its work; that is, they build a *platform* on which the Word speaks. This platform always supports the Word ministry. For example:

- Church buildings provide the opportunity for people to conveniently gather and hear God’s Word preached and taught.
- Points of social, cultural, and ethnic connection provide the opportunity to reach more people with God’s Word, because, generally speaking, more people will attend a meeting of any kind—including a church meeting—that feels socially, culturally, or ethnically familiar.

- A preacher's eloquence, humor, and charisma provide opportunities to proclaim the Word clearly.
- Playing music in a culturally familiar style lowers social barriers and increases people's comfort levels, which in turn helps to make the notes and melodies a better platform for the words of Scripture.
- Strong relationships and community provide opportunities because people are generally more inclined to listen to those whom they know and trust.
- Financial resources provide opportunities to present God's Word. Money builds buildings, buys airplane tickets, and feeds the children of missionaries.
- Hospitality doesn't transform people, but it creates a space in which transformation can occur, as I heard Pastor Dhati Lewis once say.
- Acts of kindness and goodness by God's people can make the message of the Scriptures attractive and even compelling.

Being human means facing the debris-filled whirlwinds of physical, cultural, emotional, relational, financial, and moral realities. Such realities can hinder Word ministry, or they can be employed to build a platform for it. This should be as obvious as saying a big building holds more people than does a small one. God can and does use natural means to spread His Word. All things being equal, we can say that the greater level of natural gifting or natural affinity, the greater opportunity there is to speak God's Word. For ministers and churches, then, Jesus' parable of

the talents is relevant here: The servant with five talents *should* employ his five talents, the servant with two his two, and the servant with one his one (Matt. 25:14–30). We have a stewardship obligation to maximize our natural resources and gifts for supernatural ends.

Yet my sense is that this is where the conversation ends for many church leaders. Their rationale is, if something provides an opportunity, grab it! The problem is, Scripture and life often give us a number of factors to consider, and wisdom requires us to temper one set of considerations with others. Let me offer three further considerations.

RETAIN PRUDENCE

First, to say that these things are “platforms” or “opportunity-providers” means that they fall into the realm of prudence. Not every opportunity to speak God’s Word is a good opportunity. Some come with costs. Even matters commanded by Scripture, as with the command “Let us do good to everyone” (Gal. 6:10), are subject to principles of Christian liberty and circumstance (which is why Paul precedes this command with the words “as we have opportunity”). We should not assume that every opportunity, by definition, is good. Discretion must always be used. The Word alone gives spiritual life, which means it alone must play the lead role. Everything else, at most, plays supporting cast and is subject to other considerations. The problem with comparing ministry to *two equal wings* is that it tempts churches to build their ministries upon these other things, as if they could equally give life.

UNITE AROUND THE GOSPEL

Second, the temptation to give a lead role to something besides the Word risks undermining the gospel because it builds on

something besides the gospel. The church of Christ is to be united around the gospel words of Christ, not around ethnicity, socio-economic class, partisan politics, age, style, or anything else. It's where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, because the gospel creates one new man among those who were formerly divided (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:19–20). Consider carefully, therefore, what it means when we deliberately attempt to unite people to our church, not around the gospel Word, but around some point of natural affinity. Whether we mean to or not, we're sending the message that (1) the gospel Word is not sufficient for creating unity among sinners; and that (2) other forms of natural unity are just as worthy as gospel unity.

To put it another way, trying to unite or attract people to my church through some point of natural affinity or gifting means I'm potentially relying on the power of people's idols to build my church. And, as it's often been stated, what you attract people *with* you attract them *to*.

One last strategy that risks undermining the gospel is the strategy of appealing to non-Christians by drawing them into the *experience* of worship. The goal here is to let outsiders *feel* what worshipping God is like. The problem, however, is that worship is not a feeling or an experience. You cannot create true worship in people's hearts by placing them in the right surroundings. You might as well take them to the temple, have them sacrifice a lamb, and see if that doesn't provoke contrition in their hearts. A good percentage of the Old Testament is devoted to demonstrating that placing people in the right environment—in the land, under a king, with the law in hand—does not produce worshipers.

Worship, very simply, is born of repentance. It's the result of a Word- and Spirit-induced change of nature. The unrepentant, by definition, neither worship nor experience worship. Yes, remove stumbling blocks, and be a Jew to Jews and a Gentile to Gentiles. But realize that an over-emphasis on contextualization or seeker-

sensitivity is to fall back to old covenant thinking—as if right circumstances and forms will lead to right hearts.

The glory of the new covenant gospel is that it builds unity across the world's barbed-wire fences of division. Years ago, I spent several months as the interim pastor of a church in the Caribbean Islands. During the church's time of singing, I, a stiff white guy, stood still up front and kept my hands at my side while singing with all my heart. Look, I'm not the most outwardly expressive person, okay? Meanwhile, all around me, a colorful chorus of Caymanians and Jamaicans and Dominicans swayed with hands high in praise. They loved me and I loved them as we sang to the same Savior and Lord, even if we didn't look or sound the same. I didn't want them to pretend to be me, and they didn't want me to pretend to be them. In fact, the unity in difference we shared in the gospel deepened our joy. It made the gospel that much more wonder-provoking and glorious.

MULTIETHNIC AMBITIONS, BUT ETHNIC DIVISIONS

Before moving to a third consideration, I want to mediate on this second one a moment longer by thinking about what it means for race or ethnicity. Most evangelicals today claim they want ethnic diversity in their churches. Praise God! It's a right ambition to have, because multiethnicity in churches today previews and builds toward that last day when every tribe, tongue, and nation will gather around God's throne in shared worship (Rev. 7:9–10).

The trouble is, our church programs not only work against multiethnicity, they effectively reinforce the world's lines of ethnic division.

Since at least the middle of the twentieth century, church leaders have worked to build their churches by targeting groups of people who share ethnic, linguistic, educational, and class

similarities—like “White, college-educated, middle-class suburbanites” or “millennial, coffee-drinking hipsters.” Books for pastors call this the “homogenous unit principle.” You figure out what your homogenous unit is, and you stylize everything in your church to appeal to this demographic unit.

Sociologists can tell you exactly why this “works.” Their studies show that human beings are consistently biased toward their own groups. The power of group bias informs everything from consumer decisions and sports-team rivalries to racism, sexism, and nationalism. We all tend to evaluate the members of our own groups positively, and outsiders or the members of other groups negatively. Further, we are more likely to remember the positives and forget the negatives of our fellow members over time, and do just the opposite for anyone outside our group. This is why in high school, for instance, you probably wore the same clothes your friends wore. It’s also why you hear people telling and re-telling the same stories about their bad encounter with “that foreigner” or “that white woman” or “that black man.” And the point of the story is to characterize the whole group. Of course, they would never employ isolated anecdotes like this to characterize their own groups. To put this positively, like attracts like. We naturally trust and favor those who are like us.

The homogeneous unit principle puts the power of group bias and loyalty to work by encouraging pastors to build their churches on the powers of demography and group loyalty. You can find this principle at work in the seeker-sensitive movement of the 1980s or the missional movement of the early 2000s. For instance, one well-known pastor argues, “Generally a pastor can define his appropriate target audience by determining with whom he would like to spend a vacation or an afternoon of recreation.”¹

Now, I’m not saying attractional ministry is, by definition, racist or sexist. Those are perverse forms of group loyalty and bias. I’m not even saying that all forms of group loyalty and bias

are bad. Showing a particular love to your kids, your sports team, even your nation can be good. My point is simply that attractional ministry works to build churches on something natural, not supernatural; something of man, not of God; something liable to manipulation and perversion and racism, not free from all stain.

In the short term, this will build churches. Demographic and cultural loyalty is genuinely, empirically, demonstrably powerful. It's like mortar to bricks.

The trouble is it produces mostly white churches and mostly college-educated churches and mostly millennial churches. (Obviously, not all mono-ethnic churches have such a genesis, such as black churches, which were created when whites kicked them out.) Evangelicals might shrug their shoulders at such demographic divisions: "Oh well, at least we're getting people into churches." But the net result is that we harden the lines of ethnic division. We affirm our culture's discriminations. And we build something that's as much a product of fallen culture as it's a product of heaven.

Further, church members will consider the unity of their churches and think they're enjoying the power of the gospel, when really they're enjoying the power of demographic favoritism. They'll think their unity comes from Pentecost, when it's just as likely to be the curse of Babel and each of our preferences for "my" group. Also, our neighbors and children will more easily dismiss our churches as one more interest group—and they will be somewhat right to do so.

A church that lives by the power of sociology and attraction and culture will die by the power of sociology and attraction and culture.

On the other hand, churches that more deliberately seek to build on the power of the Word and Spirit have a better chance of tearing down the walls that divide us. I've seen it slowly happen in my own congregation and others. And a church characterized

by the mixed demography of the gospel (black and white, working class and educated class, rich and poor) is much harder for skeptics to explain away.

To a third consideration, then . . .

REMAIN HUMBLE AND RELY ON GOD

Third, God often uses the weak, the poor, and the unlikely to attract sinners to Himself. He does this to show that power belongs to Him. Points of natural affinity, natural giftedness, and natural resources do indeed provide a platform or opportunity to speak the gospel. But right in the face of these sociological realities, God has a consistent track record of using the weak and the unlikely to show that power ultimately belongs to Him. In Genesis, He chooses the second-born son, not the first. In Exodus, He chooses stammering Moses to lead His people. In Deuteronomy, He tells Israel that He chose them in spite of the fact that they were the fewest of people and not the greatest (Deut. 7:7). In Samuel, He chooses the seventh son of Jesse, David, because “the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7).

While exalting those of humble circumstance, God also humbles the exalted: the builders of Babel, Pharaoh, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, and so on. And so it goes through the Bible. Jesus Himself “had no form or majesty . . . no beauty that we should desire him” (Isa. 53:2). And of course Paul tells the church in Corinth:

Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things

that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor. 1:26–29)

Church leaders today are quick to lean into their strengths for building churches. To some extent, this must be appropriate. But how many, with Paul, boast all the more gladly of their weaknesses, so that the power of Christ would rest upon them (2 Cor. 12:9)?

Again, points of natural affinity, giftedness, and resources provide opportunities for the Word to go forth. They are common grace platforms. But we must not ask them to do what they cannot do. They cannot change the heart. None of them are the “key” to successful ministry (I’m shocked at how often church growth writers use that word). Let me offer one practical principle: There’s a difference between *removing distractions* (uncomfortable seats, hot rooms, strange music, cultural or spiritual offenses) so that the Word is free to do its work; and *creating attractions* (through clothes, musical style, drama, etc.). Removing distractions, which is what Paul does, is prudent; creating attractions, generally, is not. In my uninspired opinion, that means

- *Clothing*: We should choose clothing that (1) does not draw attention to ourselves and (2) shows respect for others. We should not choose clothes in order to impress.
- *Humor*: Some humor in the pulpit can help to lower emotional defenses, as well as to express genuine God-imagining joy in some application of the Word. We should not use humor to attract, impress, or win hearers.
- *Music*: I believe music provides a God-given avenue for the mind, heart, and emotions to respond to God’s

revelation—to confess, to grieve, to rejoice, and to revel in His attributes (see chapter 8 for further discussion). We should not use music to create the *sense* or *experience* of worshiping God among the unrepentant. They, by definition, cannot worship. Nor should we use music to gain “customers.” What do we want in our music? Biblical words or meditations on biblical words. Music that suits the words. Singable and memorable melodies. Instrumentation that allows a congregation to hear themselves sing to one another (Eph. 5:19). Also, we must recognize that our preferences for a certain musical style are always culturally conditioned. And love for neighbor might call us to sacrifice our preferences for another’s.

- *Intelligence/charisma/eloquence*: Such gifts are wonderfully employed to convey the glory and beauty of God in the gospel, and they should be stewarded accordingly. So expect charismatic preachers to have bigger churches. But such gifts should not be used to impress or manipulate. The difference between a right and wrong use of eloquence, for instance, shows up in a thousand small decisions about which words to use. It’s the difference, perhaps, between clear, strong, compelling images and flowery, erudite grandiloquence.
- *Liturgical forms*: Our liturgy is how we arrange the public gatherings of our churches: what’s said, sung, prayed, and supped—and in what order. In an emotivistic age, service planners often aim for a certain feel. What can we do to inspire, they ask themselves. Do we dim the lights? Use candles? Go up a key on the final verse? Many planners simply follow the entertainment liturgy of television: tightly scripted musical intros and fade-outs, no dead

time onstage, performance lighting, prepared remarks designed to sound unprepared. Yet Scripture's goal for a church's public gatherings should be different: not entertainment, but exposure to God's Word. Churches are told to preach the Word, sing the Word, read the Word, portray the gospel Word through the ordinances, and build one another up with words (see 1 Cor. 11, 14; Eph. 4; Col. 3; 2 Tim. 4).

Whatever liturgical forms a church might adopt, whether high or low, whether suited for this context or that, those forms should expose a church to the Word. They should even catechize the church in the Word. Making this the goal will impact a thousand large and small decisions: Maybe you turn up the lights so that people can see their Bibles; maybe you allow for longer sermons; maybe you plan times of silence so that people can reflect on the words just read. I appreciate the recent literature emphasizing the role of liturgy in cultivating new habits of the heart. But remember that liturgy is a form. It's like an empty pipe. It is no good without the water of the Word flowing through it. The Word must be the content and criteria of our liturgy.

- *Relationships/community/good works*: Relationships and good works should be used to give evidence of the power of the message (the topic I move to next). They must not be used to supplant the message.

In sum, we should use whatever gifts, resources, and natural affinities we have to proclaim His Word, but we should also do our best to make sure people join our local church because they love the gospel, not because we're the cool church or the

intellectual church, the baby-boomer church or the church of a particular ethnicity. Earlier I said that the greater the natural gift or natural affinity, the greater opportunity there is to speak God's Word. That's true. But it's also true that the greater the natural gift or affinity, the greater the risk. There's a risk to the Christian who will be tempted to rely on these natural advantages, and there's a risk to the non-Christian who stands a higher chance of being deceived into thinking he's a Christian, to his eternal loss. Hence, the talented, well-resourced church may have to work harder than others at walking by faith and doing what they can to prevent false professions. The naturally charismatic speaker might learn to refrain from playing on people's emotions, and the naturally funny speaker might learn how to hold in a joke or two.

Sadly, I find it's the case that the most talented preachers and well-resourced churches are often the most careless about cultivating seedbeds of Christian nominalism, when it should be the opposite.

EVIDENCE FOR THE POWER OF THE WORD

In addition to providing a platform for the Word to go forth, some of these other elements provide evidence for the power of the Word. They confirm or testify that the Word is life-changing. The attractive nature of good works and the compelling picture of a Christian community are two such elements, says Scripture.

Scripture never encourages churches to prioritize magazine-cover good looks for its leadership, but God does mean for some things in a church to be *attractive* to the world, namely, the holiness and self-sacrificial love of Christians in their lives together and apart. The New Testament is filled with such statements:

So that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 5:16)

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:35)

Bondservants . . . are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior. (Titus 2:9–10)

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. (1 Peter 2:12)

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct. (1 Peter 3:1–2)

Did you notice the phrase Paul uses in Titus 2? Our good deeds and righteousness should *adorn* our doctrine. Maybe the girl does need to be dressed up after all; but we need to dress her only with righteousness and love, not designer jeans.

Does this mean that we should say that good works—like faithful marriages, honesty at work, caring for the poor, pursuing justice, submitting to non-Christian husbands—are *necessary* for conversion and church growth? Does it mean that the bird won't fly without the two wings of Word ministry and deed ministry?

It depends on what you mean by “necessary.” Are good works necessary for the Word and Spirit to give new life? Certainly not! The previous chapter and the first half of this chapter should have dispensed with that idea. People get saved listening to hypocritical preachers and anonymous radio preachers. You

can proclaim the gospel without deeds, but you cannot proclaim the gospel without words.

But aren't good deeds necessary for preserving the public reputation of the church and its Lord? For demonstrating that He means what He says? For demonstrating that we have integrity? Generally speaking, yes! Listen to how one biblical minister advises another: "Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us" (Titus 2:7–8).

The gospel Word creates gospel life in an individual and in a church. When that individual and church then turn to minister to others, their word and life should be *integrated*—have *integrity*. In one sense, there are not two things (two wings) but one thing with two distinct parts—a faithful witness in word and deed. Also—and this is very important—the two distinct parts are doing distinct things, like the wings and engine on a jet do different things. The Word is doing things that the deed cannot do: It's pointing to an invisible God who has sent His Son to die on the cross; it's calling all to repentance; it's freeing the enslaved; and it's giving life to the dead. The deed is then doing something the Word cannot do: It's demonstrating or picturing the effects of this gospel Word. It's testifying to its life-changing power. The Word is the main character; the deed is the supporting character.

To summarize: Are deeds "necessary" for raising the dead and freeing the enslaved? From the standpoint of the Spirit's work, no. From the standpoint of Christianity's public credibility, generally yes. The Spirit's work *will* produce evidence in our deeds. And every good deed becomes one more witness who testifies on behalf of the gospel's truth and power.

FREEDOM!

The Word frees the heart, and it does so in the most remarkable way. Whatever happened to Brian, the former drug addict? He's doing amazing. For a time, he led our church's involvement in a nearby homeless shelter, getting our members to do everything from serving meals to leading chapel services. A few years ago, he left for seminary that he might devote himself full-time to preaching the Word. The man knows the Word, loves the Word, submits to the Word, and so adorns it continually. Praise God, he's free!

RECOMMENDED READING

- Dever, Mark. *The Compelling Community: Where God's Power Make a Church Attractive*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2015.
- Wells, David. *Courage to Be Protestant*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.
- White, Thomas, and John M. Yeats. *Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our Obsession with Easy Christianity*. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009.

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