

A Healthy Understanding of Congregational Worship

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I coordinate this conference and put it together and assign the topics and thought, "Why in the world did I give myself the Saturday afternoon session?" You have to feel like you've been drinking out of a fire hydrant with all of the teaching and what good preaching and teaching we've had and so by this time you're weary. I understand that. I am myself and sometimes this session becomes like an adult nursery. He who endures to the end shall be saved.

I'm going to talk about Congregational worship and go ahead and put the statement up there. Congregational worship is something that guys are all over the place on and, you know, we're just so prone to extra-biblical excess. Brothers come out of cold, dead, doctrinally weak churches and so many of them are right to say, "This isn't good," and they want to fix it and they swing way over here and did they get into wild rock music, seeker-friendly secular music, even approaches to worship that often leave even any trace of biblical textual context or even exposition. Other brothers see the new wave of what's called seeker-friendly or whatever, liberal, loose churches and they say, "You know, that's too far. We know this isn't right. We may swing way over here," and they get into a very strict, cold, structured, rigid approach to worship and we're just very prone to that. I'll just be honest, I'm very prone to that. We're all over the place and I guess 25+ years ago, I put this statement together. I've tweaked it some, just to give us something of a guidance of the essential things of congregational worship. I'm not saying that we've arrived on it and if you see something that is glaringly deficient, I'm open to reproof. I'm always learning and sharpening. But I do think there's some good things here and I know there are some of you who would say, "You know, I'm real comfortable with how we do worship," and you may be right where you need to be but maybe there will be something here that will stir your heart, enlighten you a little bit. Maybe there'll be something substantial that you need to think about. Some of this is very basic but, you know, some of the very basic things we tend to miss. The very basic things we tend to miss.

Let me give a couple of thoughts before I get right into it. I don't see anything about the ordinances in this statement because I think that's understood. When you have your ordinances and how you function in them, we all know that's to be done as part of congregational worship, when that time and place comes. I don't mention public prayer because, again, I believe that's an understood thing that every congregational worship service would have seasons of prayer, times of prayer. We don't have a real structured,

organized way that we approach that here. We kind of sense what God's doing and we might have a special prayer for a sick person or finances. Things have been tight around here the last few years, tighter than we would like, and we've had little special seasons here and there of interceding and actually praising the Lord for whatever he's doing but giving our request to God. So I don't say anything about prayer here because I think that's understood. I don't say anything about an organized time to read Scripture and I know there are some people who feel very strongly about that. By the way, I don't know how you can preach the text without reading Scripture. So I don't really make a big deal out of that here at all. If you feel strongly about, "Well, there needs to be a section just to read Scripture in a worship service," that's perfectly good and fine as far as I'm concerned but I don't mention those things because I think those things are quite understood or they are intertwined in the other things that we're going to talk about.

Let's first of all talk about, I. The church assembled as if we need to be reminded of that but I think we do. I think there needs to be a new exhortation and a new encouragement about the church assembled. Now, we've already talked about small groups in the conference. Brother Matt exhorted us about that and we work very hard at that. We talked about personalized, strategic world missions, a very essential part, I think, of healthy church life. But everything centers on congregational worship which is built around the preaching of the word of God. So let's talk about the church assembled. In the Old Testament, the word "assembly" is used over 100 times referring to the gathering or at least a gathering of the congregation of Israel. Deuteronomy 31:12 says, "Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law." That was just the common practice. Nehemiah 8:2, "Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the," here it is, "assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding." I think that clearly points out the concept of a nursery. We're not going into that issue but we believe in using a nursery. Let me just say one thing about that: the one thing a young mother needs is the preaching of the word of God. Whatever else she needs. I cannot think of a more wonderful ministry than to fill an infant child with the love and care, quote the Scriptures, sing Bible songs. We try to do those things in our nursery so that mom might have an hour and 15 minutes without distraction to receive the preaching of the word of God. Anyway, that's all I'll say about that.

Eight times the Old Testament uses the phrase "the whole assembly." We know later chronologically speaking, as time went on, the regular meeting place for the worship among the Jews was called the synagogue. By the way, the synagogue was full of compromise, unbiblical, unspiritual, yet Jesus faithfully attended the synagogue. That ought to say something to us. Luke 4:16, "And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read." Now we know in the fullness of time, he did away with that institution but it does show you something of the great emphasis God puts on the regular assembly of his people.

Now let's chronologically go forward to the New Testament. In the New Testament we have the word "assembly" which is the Greek equivalent of the Old Testament word for assembly which always referred to the gathering of the congregation. For example, in Luke, "If a man comes into your assembly," and he's talking about if it was just understood and it's quite interesting as we think about Christendom today, how we have to define, explain and exhort people about things that the first century church absolutely understood. I mean, if you came to faith in Christ, you were no less than a countercultural revolutionary. I mean, the Jews were opposed to you and the Jewish establishment and the Gentiles were very opposed to you so it was kind of by default, you found the assembly of believers because you needed to be with your kind of people. So, there might be a great amount of strong exhortation about being faithful to the assembly though that's in the text as we'll see in a moment, but it was understood.

Someone questioned me about baptism earlier and they said, "You know, in the biblical text it looks like baptism was done immediately after somebody was saved." I would always agree with that. I would say, immediately after anyone is saved, they should be baptized if you are sure they are saved. That's the \$64 million question. Not did they walk to the front. Did they pray a prayer? Are they born again. Do they show the evidences of the true new birth, of repentance toward God in faith and or Jesus Christ? But you can't take the cultural context of the book of Acts and a baptism there and compare it to baptism in America today. If you want something of the equivalent, we can put you on an airplane and take you over to Tehran, Iran and we could put you in the town square and give you a megaphone and let you pronounce that Jesus is your only Lord and Savior and Mohammed is a lie and the Koran is a lie and we can baptize you there. I guarantee you when you come up out of the water, you're going to be looking for the local assembly. It's just understood. I need to be with people who are like me. So the fact that we have to teach and exhort people about faithfulness to the assembly is really not very common in the early parts of the New Testament. I think simply because the persecution and the cultural opposition that so many of them faced.

A couple of other examples, Acts 5:12, as the day of Pentecost has come, the Spirit has anointed the church age and then it says, "At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico." Now, the concept of small group ministry jumps out in the early pages of Acts also. We know that the people regularly met in household settings where the apostles would tour around and teach the word of God and they fellowshiped together but also they regularly met as a whole group. As long as they feasibly could. We know that they grew so large so quickly that I'm sure different things had to be done but from the beginning, there was every effort to meet together. For example, in Acts, chapter 6, as progressive things are happening, you've got to understand, when you look at how the church should function, be a little careful about saying, "Well, Acts is all I need." Well, you've got to understand something: things were happening in Acts that don't ever happen again. The day of Pentecost was a one-time event. It's not going to happen again like that. Now God help us, we need the Spirit to fall, Amen? But you're not going to have Pentecost again because the church age isn't going to be birthed again. We're not seeing tongues of fire fall on people as they did on the day of Pentecost. There were some

unique things. You've got to be a little careful with saying, "We're going to take a carbon copy. That's the model." You need to take the full completed, progressive revelation. That is all the teachings in the New Testament. of course, particularly through the epistles, give us a full and balanced understanding of church life and congregational life.

So when we get to Acts, chapter 6, things have developed a little bit. They have a problem in the church: some of the widows are being overlooked in the daily administration of food and so the apostles, the pastors and the leaders of the church said, "You know, we need to appoint some Spirit-filled, godly man who will take care of this task," and the text tells us in Acts 6:5, "The statement found approval with the whole congregation." The whole church is meeting together. Now again, I wouldn't die on this mountain but I believe quite strongly that the congregation still is the final authority in the matters of the church, that the final authority is not to be abrogated to some distinct board or bishop or cardinal outside of the local assembly. But once a congregation identifies, lays their hands on even, affirms God-called elders, then that congregation should honor and submit to that leadership. But it is the congregation's job to seek and to pray, "Who are those that God is raising up as the pastors and elders of our church?"

Then, of course, we have Hebrews 10:24 and 25, "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some," so they were beginning to have some of the same problems obviously we see in our culture today. You hate to even think it but one of the greatest things for church attendance is persecution. I mean, let something... I remember when Operation Desert Storm was about to happen. I remember here and everywhere, the churches got quite full for a while and it's interesting how that has an effect. So brothers, as we're praying, "Oh God, revive the church," we may be asking, "God, bring difficult times."

Well, faithfulness to the congregational assemblies was commanded and expected, of course, in both the Old and the New Testament. We are living in an age that where as far as church history goes, something very unique is happening and has been happening and that is parachurch ministries have become the center of a lot of people's hearts and energies and lives. While they're not evil and we thank God for the good that's done, brothers and sisters, your loyalty to any ministry is at best second to your commitment to God's local church and that assembly. At best second. And would it not be just like Satan to take a good brother or sister who has a love for God and a love for the truth and tie them up in something good so that they'll miss the best. Again, for 2,000 years of church history, that was almost a nonexistent thing. Even when people like we see in our present day in Western evangelicalism, we see such weakness and such sub-normal church life both in doctrine and in methodology. We feel that we need to find something different but in every age, maybe except for the last 50-100 years in Western culture, people went and started true churches. They didn't go and start a movement on Thursday night of discipleship. Again, not evil, but it should never get in the way of God's commitment to the local church.

I want to use a word here that as I meditated on it, it registered with me heavily and that's this word "sanctity." I am convinced we have lost the sanctity of the local church

meeting. Sanctity means it's set apart, it's the ordinance of God. There's a holiness. There is no other assembly like this. The sanctity of the congregational assembly. You know, the word for "assembly, ekklesia," simply means "called out." You could put that extra word on there, "called out ones." God by his work and by his grace, calls us out of all other assemblies and has given us the divine privilege and the divine duty to assemble as the called out ones. Our people need to grasp that image. When you are saved, all other assemblies become at best secondary because God himself has called you out and placed you in a new assembly. No longer is it Kiwanis or Band Boosters or the Ladies Garden Club. That may be something that you can stay in but that is no longer who you are. Your identity has changed from other assemblies to a new assembly. This is the work of God. It's not, "It's good to go to church," or "I'll go to church if it's interesting," or "I'll go if it's exciting," or "I'll go if the pastor is humorous." That's not the issue. It's the ordinance of God. You say, "But you don't know the churches in my area and you don't know how unbiblical they are and how doctrinally weak they are." Then you must find the strongest, most healthy church you can and fatefully meet with them and serve the Lord. God has no plan B.

The local church family assembled together. It's a holy ordinance of God and wanton neglect should result in church discipline. The second part of the statement, the church assembled to be strengthened and here is where I tweaked it because I've been convicted about this in recent years and some of you brothers who I'm close to know I've talked with you about this: to be strengthened by the spiritually empowered preaching of the word. That is the primary thing in the congregational assembly: the preaching of the word of God. But not just the preaching, the spiritually empowered preaching of the word of God. I used the word "strengthened" here in a very broad way because we just don't have time to talk about all the ministries of the word: the teaching, the instructing, the encouraging, the exhorting, the reproving, the rebuking. The Bible uses a broad concept for example, in Acts 20:32. "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up," that's a broad statement. It builds you up by rebuking you when you need it. It builds you up by reproving you when you need it. It builds you up by instructing you, by encouraging you, by edifying, admonishing you. You put all the descriptives in there that you want.

Romans 16: 25, the same idea, "Now to Him who is able to establish you," the idea of strengthening, "according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ." So preaching the word was the centerpiece, the foundation stone of God's assembly both in the Old and the New Testament. Even though obviously, the administration of the sacrificial systems and the rites and the rituals of the accounting of Judaism was quite prominent, we see over and over through the Old Testament the real prominence was the preaching of the word of God. Exodus 35:1, "Then Moses assembled all the congregation of the sons of Israel, and said to them, 'These are the things that the LORD has commanded you to do.'" That's nothing less than standing up and proclaiming the word of God. Nehemiah 8:1-3, "And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel." They had come back from captivity and what is the first thing that they do? "Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women

and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law." That was the embryonic picture, if you will, of God's eternal church and the centerpiece of God's assembled church, the word of God being preached.

Let's, of course, progress on to the New Testament and we can't go there without looking at 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5. I think we've got all of this on the screen or we'll roll it up there as as you need it. Here Paul is admonishing his understudy Timothy and he's telling him of what he must be about, what must be the centerpiece of his ministry. He says, "You, Timothy, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired," God breathed, "by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness." Brothers and sisters, that means the Scripture does all that you need to get done. You don't need the Scripture plus Freud. You do not need the Scripture plus BF Skinner. The Scripture has all that you need. He amplifies this further, of course. It makes you "adequate and equipped for every," not most, "for every good work." Have you been on a pilgrimage of realizing and hopefully correspondingly repenting that you really don't believe that? If you're not, I'm going to tell you what you are, you're a lying preacher. Every pastor struggles with walking out his ministry with firm confidence that the word of God is adequate for everything in his ministry and that should be a continual... Because you will catch yourself in your weak, long life as a pastor, whether it's the hospital, counseling a troubled married couple or a soul that is long gone into rebellion, whatever it may be. You will find yourself shirking away in the fear of man from the word of God because you don't believe it's adequate for every good work. Not to mention, the times we mount the pulpit with doubts about the adequacy of the word of God. Now, I think you're in good company. I think every man of God walks that battle but here's my challenge to you: stay in the battle. Stay. Wherever you are, stay in the battle. Leave this conference gird up your loins and say, "When I go back out there, always with love, always with compassion but every counseling session is going to say, What saith the Scriptures? Every issue I face is going to be, What saith the Scriptures? I'm not going to capitulate. Equipped for every good work."

He said, "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead," what strength he puts by this, "and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season," you could amplify and say when it's easy, "and out of season," when it's difficult. "Reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." There is so much we could say here but let me just say 2 or 3 things about 2 or 3 aspects of this last part of this text. First of all, in 4:3, he

says, "the time will come when they," the listeners, "will not endure sound doctrine." Endurance has the idea of discipline. He says, "The time will come when men will not have a humble, sober discipline to receive the exegetical preaching of the word of God. They will want you to dress it up. They will want you to flavor it with cultural verities and cultural appeasing things. But a mature congregation is a congregation that has learned that you don't come to church and sit on the pew and hope the pastor is interesting. You come alert, prayed up, disciplined to hear the preaching of the word of God. He said, "There's a time that will come when that's going to be different. They'll not endure." There is an aspect of disciplined endurance when the word is preached. Now God forbid that you try to be a boring pastor. Don't think you're being holy by being stoic. I believe the passion of the word ought to come through the man of God. Nevertheless, don't capitulate to those notions that we have to bring in worldly things to keep our people enticed to the word of God. Our people should be taught to grow up, quit being babies, and have manly discipline when the word is preached. Amen? Manly discipline.

Then he says, "Do the work of an evangelist." As he's preached here, the whole context here: reprove, rebuke, exhort, you are adequate, every good work. You would think it's all in the context of just speaking to the bride of Christ, those who are already saved but I think one of the points that ought to be made here and that Paul is certainly interpolating in here is that evangelism is always in order. In every sermon, in every lesson, in every text, it ought to be woven throughout the fabric of that biblical message, appealing to the lost, return to Christ and to be saved. Do the work of an evangelist.

I remember years ago as a very young pastor and surveying all that was going on in the world of Christianity and being troubled by a lot of what I was seeing, but not knowing really what was right and that is where some of you are: you kind of know what's wrong but you're not sure what's right yet. Do you know what you're going to do? You're going to make a bunch of messes and I have to. Hopefully you can take my mistakes and Brother Jano's mistakes and some of the rest of us and say, "They came out of the same thing, knowing what wasn't right but not sure what was right and maybe I can learn from them so that I don't have to make the same excesses and mistakes that they made." Anyway, one of the things we were so exposed to was the easy believism that is so prominent and you see all of these people, Southern Baptists have millions and millions and millions of people who walked to the front, came down to the magic spot and prayed a prayer and maybe had a very minimal amount of counseling and they don't even ever come to church again. So we knew we had a problem. I used to think, "Well, if that's what evangelism is, what does Paul mean when he says do the work of an evangelist? That's not work that's three minutes. I can get anybody saved in three minutes. Pray this prayer. Pray that prayer. You're saved." And so it was really confusing to me until God began to show me, no true evangelism may take days, weeks, months and years of preaching, teaching, counseling and exhorting before they are wrought upon by the Spirit of God through the weight of their sin and wickedness and turn with joyous trust and rest in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior. It may take some work but I can tell you one thing, after being here 33 years now, we have been working at this and trying to do it better.

The fruit we're seeing now is the best fruit we've ever seen but it has taken some work. It doesn't all happen just like that.

He says there, "Fulfill your ministry." Do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. That phrase literally means "leave nothing undone." I think what Paul is saying there is that proper Bible preaching fulfills your ministry. It leaves nothing undone. It gets it all done. I believe it was Martin Luther that said the highest form of worship is the preaching of the word of God. The greatest worship is not the song service. I wouldn't have a minister of music if he thought the song service was as important as preaching the word of God. That's why I've had a very painful divorce with four before Tom got here because they get to thinking that. "If I can get people stirred up and joyous, we'll get big crowds." I don't care to have a crowd that comes to get stirred up and joyous. Now I like to have great and joyous and wondrous worship but the greatest worship is the preaching of the word. Why is that true? Because there is no time when God is being revealed as fully and as accurately for who he really is than when the word is going forth. Worship is about him being worshiped and honored and known for who he has revealed himself to be and the best songs in the world can only give you a little understanding of God but preaching the word can give you a great understanding of God. When the word of God is preached in the power of the Spirit and then people are receiving it with a manly discipline to take it in, repent of where they are wrong, adore the God they are learning of, I can tell you, that's the great worship of God. It all centers around the preaching of the word of God.

You know, when we built this new auditorium, when we were designing it, we wanted the pulpit to be out here and we wanted it to be front and center. That's not because of me, absolutely not, that's because of the high view of the preaching of the word of God. The old Puritan pulpits, they were just in the center and up front and there's a reason for that because they wanted there to be a great contrast to their pulpit and the Roman Catholic pulpits. The Roman Catholic pulpit is over there in the corner somewhere behind felt whatever it is, behind the smoke that goes up or whatever they do. Do you know why? Because the center of their church is the priestcraft, the administration of the priest ministry and the sacraments. That's where saving grace comes to you and you are dependent upon this human man to continually administer the sacraments that you might get the grace that you might somehow get to heaven one day. We are right the opposite. We say no, God reveals his Son through the faithful preaching of the word of God and that is how men come to know God, through finding the high priest, Jesus Christ, through the preaching of the word not through human priestcraft. And so we design church buildings differently than the sacramentalists who designed their church buildings.

Brothers and sisters, preaching of the word must be Spirit empowered preaching. Boy, we've got to be real careful here. This is one area that there are extreme excesses in understanding and if I or any pastor were to stand before you and say, "I can just nail down and give to you without any question what Spirit empowered preaching exactly is," that would be a non-truth. There is a mystery in that. As one African American pastor said one time, he said, I asked him, "Do you know what it is when a pastor preaches with the unction?" He said, "I don't know what it is but I do when it ain't." I think we can all sort of sense of that. However, however, how many times have I tried to pray like I've

always prayed, study like I've always studied, prepared my heart like I've tried to always prepare my heart, get in the pulpit and it's like fighting through a 12 foot lead wall just to preach. It's like it's not there and the sermon is over, I go sit on the pew and I'm ready to quit and somebody will come up and say, "God changed my life this morning." The Spirit of God has worked on me today. Isn't that good, Pastor?" It ain't you. It's not your performance. It's God's Spirit. So it's hard to define. Sometimes when the Spirit moves in the preaching of the word, there is joy and hallelujah and celebration and I do think for the most part when we get together like this, that's the Spirit. That's what the Holy Spirit does. Great worship and joyous celebration but quite honestly, the greatest moves of the Spirit we've ever experienced was quietness and weeping and no one wanting to move. No one wanted to sing. So it's very difficult to define, however, we don't need to neglect the emphasis that our preaching must be spiritually empowered preaching. The last thing we need in our efforts to build true churches is dry, cold intellectualism. 1 Corinthians 2:4 is just a great text to pierce our hearts and say, "Oh God, may that be my ministry." Paul writing to the Corinthians said, "My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom," all the human elements of eloquence and power and persuasion and charisma. It's not that Paul didn't have that, he's just saying, "I put no trust in any of that." "But it was in demonstration of the Spirit and of power."

Let me give you some things. I'm going to give you five little thoughts that helped me. This is just where I am now. I hope that I'm doing better in a few years from now but this is where I am now as far as trying to prepare for the pulpit, seeking spiritual power when we preach. Let me back up and say one thing about how would you define spiritual power. I think your preaching has obviously been spiritually empowered when people are genuinely humbled and broken over their sinfulness before God and when people are joyously resting in deeper and new faith and the great sufficiency of Jesus Christ. A lowliness of ourselves and a highness of Christ I think is a good evidence the word of God has been preached in power.

The first thing as you strive to preach with spiritual power, 1. Make sure you're studied up. Make sure you're studied up. I'm not really talking about how many hours. Boy, you can get hung up on that. Man, I went through a season. I had some people challenge me that I wasn't preaching the word and I really thought that I was but they really, it turned out as things unfolded, they were just trying to be a problem and they were. But I got into a hyper-obsessiveness of my study and that was not good. You understand that you can have study idolatry? You can have expositional idolatry. There may be times you need to take a topic and preach on it exegetically but address a topic your church needs to hear. Martyn Lloyd Jones teaches this in his book "Preachers and Preaching," and I used to so lash myself to verse-by-verse exposition I thought you were compromising but I had fallen into some expositional idolatry. There are times to do something a little different from time-to-time. Certainly, verse-by-verse, chapter-by-chapter expositions should be, must be the mainstay of the pulpit. But we can make anything an idol. Be studied up.

In 1 Timothy 4:13-15, Paul exhorts Timothy, "Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands

by the presbytery." Listen to this phrase, "Take pains with these things." Take pains with what? The public ministry of the word. Take pains with these things and then the new American Standard says, "Be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all." So a pastor should before he gets to the pulpit know his text in its grammatical historical contextual and systematic context. A lot of words, you preachers basically know what I'm talking about. You don't need to rob or violate the basic rules of grammar in your understanding of the biblical text. You need to make sure you're interpreting it in its cultural, historical setting. The Apostle Paul wrote the church at Corinth and said, "It's not good for a man to touch a woman." What does he mean? Well, culturally that meant sexual relations so make sure you're interpreting it in its cultural context. Then, of course, its systematic context. You don't want to take a theme of Scripture and dishonor what the balance of Scripture teaches on that theme or that topic.

Now, commentaries help us here. Greek and Hebrew scholars who have already done that kind of work help us greatly there but you need to study that through. The Apostle Paul tells Timothy to take pains in this study and this preaching, even to be absorbed in them. The scholars tell us those phrases mean that they are to be wholly devoted to this practice. They are to give this their entire self-dedication and one scholar said it means you are to exhaust yourself in studying and preaching. Exhaust yourself at it. It doesn't mean necessarily in the energy that you expend during the sermon, it means the whole process of prayer and preparation and studying and delivering the sermon. Now here's the \$64 million question, "Then how am I going to do those other 60 hours a week my church demands of me? If I'm going to wear myself out in the ministry of the word?" Here is the only word I have for you: keep fighting to get there. Keep fighting to get there. Keep teaching your people. Keep telling your people. That's what God called you to do. Keep informing them and edifying them. "I've got to spend the great bulk of my energies getting ready to preach on Sundays." And for you laymen who are here, God bless you for being here. That ought to be your great calling to say, "I'm going to be the man that protects the pastor so that he can be ready to preach to us the word of God. So that he can take pains in these things. So that he can be absorbed in these things. So he can give himself wholly to the preaching of the word of God." Be studied up.

What you'll find here is that the pastor who gives himself wholly to the rightful study and proclamation of the word of God will find that it sanctifies all other ministries and activities. Listen, it will sanctify everything else going on in the church. Everything else depends on it. Now you might look at Grace Life here and say, "Man, I know what this church is built on. I see your people. I see your small group work." The small group work here is dependent upon the preaching ministry of this church because it's the preaching ministry that humbles the heart. It's the preaching ministry that brings a gratitude and a joy and a love for the Christ who is revealed through preaching. Only when that kind of love and that kind of treasuring and that kind of humility is in the heart will your people function in their small groups the way they ought to function. Everything depends on the pulpit.

My time is up but I run this conference. I've got to tell you a few more things and I then I'm going to let you go. But I do want to tell you this and I just want to be transparent

because it was such a learning thing for me. I have the human gifts and I know there are some spiritual gifts that went with it. By the way, I do believe your spiritual gifts and your natural talents don't necessarily contradict each other. I see sometimes God might do some of that but generally God usually weds them together. I am a very able, structured, organized kind of guy. I can put things together and make them work but I could do that as a lost man too. When I became a pastor, you cannot imagine the work that I put into organizing our world missions ministry, organizing small groups. Outreach leaders do this; Care Group leaders do that; the teacher does this. Just teaching our people, exhorting them and encouraging them and sometimes beating them up, to be honest, and I'm ashamed of that. We had an amazing machine. We still do I think in some ways and I even had a prominent leader of the Southern Baptist Convention say, "This is the best ordered, structured church in the Southern Baptist Convention." But though I was expositional in my pulpit, I worked on my pulpit, in my heart I began to look to those structures and those machines and not the preaching of the word to change lives and build the church. And God brought me through a very difficult season of warfare, division and brokenness where honestly I had enough strength to preach the word twice on Sunday and that was it. I was wiped out and I had to give up all of my oversights and all of my care and all of my guidance for all of those ministry structures that we had gotten so much acclaim for. I had to die to it. Just it die to it. And God taught me afresh and new, "I will build my church on the preaching of my word and you're going to let everything else go until that gets in your heart again." And he did it. Do you know what he did? After I got that right... See, none of my church knows any of this. Well, there might be some very discerning man who picked it up but they wouldn't know. I mean, they probably can't tell a whole lot of difference. I hope they think their pastor preaches better as time goes on but I don't think they knew much. But I knew it. And then after God humbled me and I rededicated myself to believing in the preaching of the word as the mainstay of the church, then he started giving me back the small group work and giving me back the world missions structure because now it was in place. So don't get out of balance and think that you can throw everything else away. No, it's just the balance and the priority.

Be studied up. Secondly, and I've got to move fast. Be meditated up. That's different than studied. Meditation is that musing. The scholars tell us that the old word "meditation" comes from a word that means "a cow or a sheep chewing the cud." They burp some of that stuff back up out of one stomach and they chew on it and then they swallow it back down. Now I've been told, if a cow or a sheep, and we have a cattlemen here and he can correct me if this is wrong, after the sermon, that if they don't do that process, they can't get protein. That is the process by which microorganisms are developed and digested and it gives them protein. Brothers and sisters, that's where the spiritual protein comes from for your sermon, meditating on that text. Dr. Vance Havner, one of the greatest preachers the Baptists ever had, used to say, "Pastors don't spend enough time meditating." He talked about a place he had out in the woods and he said, "Some of my people think I just waste time and piddle but I'm going out there and I'm letting that text work on me." What I try to do and I'm not saying this is the exact way to do it, my Sunday morning sermon, I wear it all week long. Do you know what I mean by that? I wear it. You might see me in Walmart looking at the bow hunting stuff but I'm wearing that sermon and I'm musing on it. It's working on me and I'm thinking on it. There is a power that comes through that.

The Scriptures have so much to say. Psalm 119, the Psalmist said, "I meditate on thy statutes." Psalm 119:148, "I meditate on your word." Psalm 119:15, "I meditate on your precepts and regard your ways." There needs to be that that different than studying, that musing on and meditating on the word of God.

Number 3: be prayed up. Be prayed up. Again, don't make this a work thing where it's a certain amount of hours. Don't do that. That's legalism. But as you're studying, let there be a continual communion of prayer. Here's what you ought to see happening as you are communing in your study, there ought to be continual confession and repentance. A continual flow of, "Oh God, my heart is not right heart and my thinking was wrong there. God, I'm so short there." A continual prayer while you're studying that's filled with confession and repentance. Then what I try to do faithfully is I pray it through for me and basically my prayer is, I go point-by-point and say, "Oh God, make this real in my heart. Make this truth real in my life." And then I'll pray it through for the congregation, "God, if it's preached, makes this truth real for them." Be prayed up.

Number 4. I can't tell you how I've missed at this one through the years. Be faithed up. Be faithed up. James 1:5-7, "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." Here it is, "But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord." The idea of doubting here means you've got one foot over here in the human, fleshly way of making things happen and you've got one foot over here thinking God, his word and spiritual power will make it happen. Have you ever approached your ministry with a dualism? "Yeah, I believe the word and I believe it's the Spirit of God and I believe God regenerates the heart but in all honestly, I'm struggling. I'm pulled to think that this little thing and that little thing and this little gimmick and that little amusement, I need some of that to keep it going." He says, "That kind of man won't receive anything from God."

I had a turning point in my ministry, it wasn't too awful a long ago, where it just clicked. It wasn't a big deal but it just clicked. It just came to me so clearly. I don't know where I read it or how I ran across it other than the Providence of God but Charles Hadden Spurgeon was asked by a fellow pastor, the fellow pastor was burdened about his ministry and he was not seeing anyone converted. He asked Spurgeon, he said, "I'm burdened. I preach. I'm preaching the text and I'm trying to preach the gospel but no one is being converted in my ministry." Mr. Spurgeon said, "You don't expect God to convert somebody every time you preach do you?" He said, "Well, no." He said, "That's why you're not seeing any." Brothers, you have got to come to that pulpit convinced God's gospel is going to change lives. Did you hear what I said? I'm not saying hoping. You've got to come to that pulpit knowing the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. God calls weak of vessels and you are a weak vessel and God is going to use your preaching to change men and women, boys and girls for the glory of God.

I'll tell you, I was weak there. I was so weak there and I had made a new resolution to preach and walk in my ministry confident the word of God is going to change lives.

Brothers, I'm telling you, if you don't come faithed up like that, God is not going to do anything. Some of you, I know exactly where you are. You believe the doctrines of grace. You hate the old manipulations and fleshly going through the motions and hoop jumps we used to call conversion but you're not really yet convinced God's really going to do it by his word and through his Spirit. Let me tell you something: once he starts doing it, you're hooked. It's worse than cocaine. I'm telling you, when you see the Spirit of God start to change people and you know, "I didn't do that. No man can do that." And we pray that all the time, "O God, do what no man can do." Go to your pulpits faithed up.

Lastly, go to your pulpits humbled down. Humbled down. You've got to be studied up and meditated up and prayed up and faithed up but I think the last thing is to be humbled down. James 4:6 says, "God is opposed to the proud but he gives grace to the humble." Brothers, there's got to be that spirit in our hearts as we get to the pulpit whereby we say, "God, I have no hope in my preparation. I have no hope in my study. I have no hope in my personal charisma, my style, my humor. Nothing. You must do the work." You must go to that pulpit humbled down. I love it when Spurgeon said, another point that just kind of helped me, he said, "Every step to the pulpit I take he says, 'I believe in the Holy Ghost. I believe in the Holy Ghost. I believe in the Holy Ghost. I believe in the Holy Ghost.'" Why? Because that's it. It's not Spurgeon and it's not my outline. Some of you think if you alliterate your outline God's going to save two more people this month. I made myself quit alliterating for years, made myself because I thought it got too important to me. Sometimes you need to shake yourself up a little bit to get yourself off of little styles and systems and niches and things and trusting God to do the work. "It's not by might, not by power but by my Spirit says the Lord."

Preaching the word in the power of the Spirit is the foundation stone of the church. It is the hub of the wheel of church ministry. Everything else moves upon its force. One can almost say that apart from it, nothing can be done and with it, everything is possible. A powerful turning point for me several years back, I was at a funeral service and the man who had passed away was a member here and they had moved out in a rural area but they were still members. I'm real busy and I practice purposeful neglect when I need to bury myself to get ready for Sunday. I purposely neglect everything else. I had only visited this man one time. He'd been sick for a long time before he passed away and I felt guilty about that. You understand pastoral guilt, don't you? I don't care if you pastor a church of 25. Every night when you lay your head on your pillow, there is somebody you could of called. There is somebody you could have prayed for. There is somebody you could have visited that you didn't make. You take 1,000 church members and it's just 1,000 times worse. But I felt so guilty and I went to the funeral and a relative preached the service and after the service was over, the lady was walking toward me from the front of the church building. She said, "Brother Jeff, I want to tell you something." I'm telling you, I had butterflies in my stomach. She said, "You know, you only visited Johnny one time before he died." I said, "Yes ma'am." She said, "But you have so preached Christ to me and so exalted Christ that he has been so real to me. His strength and his comfort has been so present to me through this whole time. Thank you for preaching the word of God." I was blown away because I didn't believe the word was helping people like that. I

thought we had to be little priest and if we didn't show up and hold the hand, then they were going to suffer. They don't need your hand if they've got his hand.

Now listen to me: he only comes to people one way and that's through his word. Listen to this statement: I want my people to need me less because of the Christ I have given them through faithful preaching but I want them to love me more out of appreciation for the Christ I have given them through the word of God. Now what's more loving? You neglecting to wear yourself out and exhaust yourself in the word which gives people the truth of Christ and Christ himself? Are you diminishing your energies in the pulpit but you are trying to be there to touch everybody, to be there for everybody? All that is is foolish idolatry and exalting yourself. Now don't get me wrong, I visit the hospitals. I counseled this last week with a man who is going through a significant marriage trouble. I want to do that and I try to do that. I did a funeral not long ago. But my church family has come to that point where they say, "We understand exhausting yourself to preach is the primary thing and that's what we want you to do."

I'm going to run through it. I promise. Number 3: reinforce the faith through song. We're meeting as a whole assembly to be strengthened through the spiritually empowered preaching of the word of God and to reinforce the faith through song. When I say the faith here I mean the body of doctrine that we hold to and the strength that is in our daily or living faith. We seem to admonish one another, the text says. Colossians 3:16 says, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Sometimes people say, "Well, we don't sing for others." Yes we do. Yes we do. How are you going to admonish one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs if you're not thinking about others. You ought to want to think that as I sing my God's praises, I want it to help my brothers and sisters. I don't know about you but when we sing in this conference, it helps me. Hebrews 2:2, "I will proclaim thy name to my brethren in the midst of the congregation. I will saying thy praise." It's about singing.

Admonishing. We saw it in Colossians 3:16, admonishing one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, has the idea to give strong encouragement. It means that when we sing, it reinforces the faith. It gives strong encouragement to believe it, hold to it, live it out. But he says also don't just sing with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs admonishing, he says, do it with all wisdom. With all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with these psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Now wisdom demands that we first sing out of a heart full of devotion to Christ and a commitment to sing about this Christ so that our brethren are encouraged to have love and devotion to Christ. You start with your own heart full of love and devotion to Christ and with this motive in your singing, so that your brethren are admonished to grow in their love and their devotion to Christ.

One quick thought about psalms, hymns and spiritual songs and one thing is, I would just exhort you, don't get legalistic about that. There are guys who say you absolutely cannot have musical instruments in the church and you must sing only psalms. If that's what you

want to do, I'm not saying that's wrong, I'm just saying it's really difficult I think to make this text... by the way, if this text only meant you could only sing psalms or only sing Scripture, why didn't Paul just say only sing Scripture? Why does it say psalms, hymns, spiritual songs? The Greek of there almost forces you to admit that it's more than just Scripture singing. Certainly every song must be doctrinally sound and much could be said there but again, that's something I'm assuming you're with us on there.

Secondly, not only do we sing to admonish one another, we must make sure the music complements the message of the song. It's very important to make sure the music doesn't crowd out the message. Tom and I have worked on many occasions about, "You know, those are great words and that music ruins it. It has the wrong spirit about it for what that song is trying to say." This is not a perfect science, this is something you wrestle with and grow with and you work on all the time. We just need to make sure that the music complements the message, it never replaces or drowns out the message because the key element in our singing must be truth not tune.

Let's remember, music and singing is not a gift of the Spirit. There are people who think they have a certain right to sing solos in the church because they have that gift. "Well, I'm supposed to sing. I have that gift." Well, go home and sing. By the way, even your spiritual gifts that you are to employ in building up your brothers and sisters in Christ must function on the oversight of God's elder by the teaching of the word of God. You don't have a right. Spiritual gifts are a privilege to the end of building up the body and singing and music is not a spiritual gift but it is a powerful part of corporate worship. Music is a channel or a vehicle through which a pure heart filled with truth overflows to the encouragement of my brothers and sisters in Christ and of course, to praise and worship God. And then the last statement, to express congregational praise and worship to Christ our audience. God's people have always been a singing people. They always will be a singing people. Hebrews 13:15, "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name." He talks about in Ephesians 5:19, "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." So there is a duality here. You are singing with the thought, "I want this to be a strong encouragement for my brethren to devote themselves and to treasure Christ more fully. At the same time, I want it to be a melody of praise to my God." Both are happening at the same time.

As we praise and worship our God, we're praising and worshiping him thinking about all that he has done for us. A couple of thoughts here. Psalm 33:1 says, "Praise is becoming to the upright." Well, he makes us upright. We're not upright so we praise him that he has done that. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "He's made us a new creation." Psalm 40:3 talks about having a new song. So we are the assembly of people who have this radical new thing happen and we've got a new thing to sing about. I don't think it's necessarily evil to enjoy some of the music in the world as long as it doesn't contradict the teachings of Scripture but isn't it amazing what they have to sing about. Just the same old basic stuff. I remember the first time I began listening to classical music and these great operas and all of these things and I asked my wife who's a music major, I said, "What are they talking about?" It was just silly romantic love. I thought it was bigger and better than that. Is that

all they've got to sing about? This great music and all they want to talk about is the kind of stuff that you felt when you were 12 years old in junior high school? We've got something greater to sing about, the infinite glories of God and the wonders of grace and the majesty of Christ. We have a new song so we sing because of what he's done for us.

When God delivered Israel out of Egypt, they gathered, the Bible said, and sang praise to him. After they finished, Miriam took the women aside and they sang and danced. Don't tell that to some of our stricter reformed brothers. Deborah and Barak delivered from the Canaanites sang God's praises and the Bible says they sang on that day. The Old Testament says there were 4,000 temple musicians. The book of Nehemiah talks about the great choirs Israel had to glorify God that he had brought them out of captivity. The last thing Jesus did with his disciples was sing a hymn. Paul and Silas sang in prison. In Revelation 9, the Bible says with harps. There are going to be those elders who fall around the Lamb and they are going to sing a new song, "Worthy are you to take the book and to break its seals for you were slain and purchased for God with your blood men from every tribe, tongue, people and nation."

I asked Dr. Nettles about this before I left. I said, "Have you ever noticed that the Old Testament is full of using musical instruments for God's praise?" We get to heaven and Revelation says the elders will have harps and will be singing his praise so if musical instruments are okay in heaven, they are okay in the Old Testament, why are we squeezed down here in this church age and somebody tells us we can't use music? Of course we can. We got a long letter from a man one day who rebuked us for using more than a piano. Where is the piano in the Bible? I'd rather have a 30 piece orchestra that I know that are in small groups, I know their in accountability, I know they aren't in sin than have one Jezebel on the piano here full of hell. It's the heart, brothers and sisters, Nnot whether or not you found a new insight to add to your legalism.

Well, lastly we worship him not only for all he's done, we worship him because we know him. When the Jews were in captivity in Psalm 137:3, they told the Jews, "Sing us one of the Psalms of Zion." Why? Because God's people were singing people. They knew the reputation of the praises of Israel. Ephesians 5:18 says, "Don't get drunk with wine." That's always a good idea, by the way. "But be filled with the Spirit." Ephesians 5:19, following 18 says, "Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." The Spirit filled heart flows out with praise to God. Do you know what the most significant thing about Ephesians 5:19 where he says "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord," the most significant thing about Ephesians 5:19 is it comes after Ephesians 5:18, "Be filled with the Spirit."

So I think for our congregational worship, we don't need to sweat a lot of energy about, "Can we have these instruments? Or do we sing only Psalms?" Get your people full of the Spirit and whatever happens is probably okay. I understand there are things we need to watch but we're missing the spiritual part of this so often. But if true worship in the congregation depends on the Spirit, then that means a prerequisite for true worship is a regenerate church which gets back to a true gospel, of course. I mean, the unregenerate

can't worship or praise him. They do not know him nor do they know what he has done for them. There is a billboard, you may have seen one in our town and they advertise one of these new designer churches. You know, you design a church around whatever you're into? It says, "A church for the unchurched." How can that be? How can that be? It's like making a car for a non-driver. I mean, I don't know, I can't wrap my brain around that. It's like making a mixed drink for a teetotaler. It's non-alcoholic. It doesn't have the kick. It doesn't have the punch and that's what they want if they are a drinker. So a service designed for the unregenerate is non-spiritual. It has to be and that's why they are doing the secular music and watered down, weak, worthless sermons. It's non-spiritual. It's a non-service which produces non-Christians and a non-church which has non-praise and non-worship. That's all it can be.

Now, we're all about evangelizing the lost but we're not going to stop being the church. We're not going to use carnal means for spiritual results. You can't do that. We were, years ago, I'm closing with this. Pam and I were in Opryland. There is no Opryland anymore. There's an amusement park in Nashville and I think we were at a conference or something and we had some free time and we were just goofing off so we go out into the park and we hadn't been there long until I saw a man over there that was very uniquely dressed and it turned out he was a priest. He had black on and he had that collar and I knew he was a priest and so I poked at Pam a little bit and I said, "You had better behave yourself because that man intercedes to God for people." And it wasn't about five seconds later, the Spirit of God hit my heart and I just erupted with joy that I don't go to God through him. By the way, that crippled, broken down, bent over man in Rome, we don't go to God through him either. He's not the head of the church. Oh dear heavens, I thought "I've got the high priest Jesus sitting on the throne of glory at the right hand of the Majesty of on high and he's full of energy and power and vigor and can never fail," and my heart swelled with praise to God in Opryland. That's what we want on Sunday morning. You say, "Pastor, what kind of music is right in the church?" That kind. The kind that's enthralled with Jesus. The kind that's full of Jesus. Overwhelmed with Christ. Full of his joy.

Praise and worship, you see, is not really taught. You can't get enough rules and enough laws. It's not really taught, it's caught. Thank you for bearing with me and letting me violate my rule of time.

Let's pray together.