

**Passion Driven Shepherdology:
A Biblical and Practical Reconciliation of
Pastoral Preaching and Church Growth¹**

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Many conservative pastors in our day have championed the cause of biblical inerrancy. However, many of those same well-meaning men of God actually are *functional errantist*! They give the impression that they believe the Scriptures contain error, not by what they profess in their theology, but by the way they handle the Bible in their preaching. Just because the Bible has God as its author, just because it carries His authority, and just because it wields His power to change lives, does not mean that He entrusted it to us for any and every use under the sun. If the pastor overlooks this reality, his theology may be right while his preaching makes God say things He never said. And in the end, his church will never be able to grow in such a way that honors God.

If church growth is to be authentic and biblical, it has to be driven by a passion for God's glory and nothing else. The awesomeness of this task demands that we give serious attention to the task of pastoral preaching in church growth. Like Paul, contemporary shepherds are bound to speak the testimony *of* God, not merely the testimony *about* God (1 Cor. 2:1-2). Consequently, a right understanding of the testimony *of* God as well as the role of the pastor become all important for growing healthy churches. So we need to explore the philosophy of pastoral

preaching—or *shepherdology*—in an effort to redeem the ministry from some unhealthy ideologies. Consider the following charges given to the shepherd of the local congregation who would venture to preach for God’s glory and see God grow His church.

Feed the Flock, Don’t Just Pet the Sheep

I planted a church during my masters work and ended up pastoring it for almost nine years. With all of their unique challenges, church starts usually afford some privileges and blessings that do not necessarily come with established congregations. Nobody ever said to me, “Well, sonny, we were here before you got here and we’ll be here when you leave.” Nobody was there before me—my wife and I had started the work with just one other couple! We never heard anyone say, “we’ve never done it that way before.” We had never done it *any* way before!

To be sure, I made a plethora of mistakes in pastoring that young congregation. I have often said that if I had it to do over again, I would do a million things differently. But amidst all of the *faux pas*, we stumbled across a few things by accident that proved to be productive. One of our good calls was leading our congregation to share in ministry, partly so that their pastor could give concentrated and protected time to the study and preaching of God’s Word (see Acts 6:1-7). Consequently, from the outset of that ministry the first half of every one of my weekdays was given to sermon preparation through Bible study and prayer. And our congregation went to great pains to respect and protect that time.

On one particular morning I decided to break my sacred routine and make a hospital visit. A close friend and leader in our church was having surgery, and I thought I would just pop in and have prayer with the family. When I walked through the door of the waiting room I was

¹This article is an excerpted chapter from the book, Jim Shaddix, *The Passion Driven Sermon* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Pub., 2003), and is used by permission from the publisher.

pleased to see the family accompanied by the man's Sunday School teacher, department and division directors, and one of our deacons. But my joy quickly turned to anxiousness as I watched the deacon get up and move aggressively toward me wearing a very stern countenance. When we met in the middle of the waiting room, he got right up in my face and said, "What are you doing here?" My first thought was, "Well, I'm the pastor, and pastors do things like this." But before I could respond, he continued. "We've got plenty of people to handle things here," he said. "You're supposed to be in your study praying and preparing to bring us the Word of God on Sunday!" On that day, a hospital waiting room was transformed into a little corner of heaven for me.

Now I realize that there is more to pastoring than preaching, but a diligent investigation of pastoral work in the Bible reveals that the role has changed quite a bit. In the language of the New Testament the word "pastor" comes from the word *poimēn*, or shepherd. The term obviously emphasizes the pastoral role of caring and feeding. The shepherd is accompanied by two other New Testament pictures of the pastor. The word "elder" is the Greek word *presbuteros*, from which comes the word "presbyterian." The word refers to mature age or character. The word "bishop" is the Greek word *episkopos*, from which comes the word "episcopal." This word means overseer or guardian and refers to what a man does. All three terms—shepherd, elder, and bishop—are used of the same church leaders. While all three terms emphasize the pastoral role of caring and feeding, the term *shepherd* is the primary analogy in Scripture for the pastoral office and it permeates the Old and New Testament teaching regarding the leadership of God's people.

Whatever this idea may mean for us today, the biblical picture is clear that the primary responsibility of the shepherd certainly is not to pet the sheep! Charles Jefferson was just one

voice that arose throughout history to champion for such an emphasis. While admitting that the job certainly involved elements of administration and remedial care, He asserted:

That the feeding of the sheep is an essential duty of the shepherd—calling is known even to those who are least familiar with shepherds and their work. Sheep cannot feed themselves, nor water themselves. They must be conducted to the water and the pasture. . . . Everything depends on the proper feeding of the sheep. Unless wisely fed they become emaciated and sick, and the wealth invested in them is squandered. . . . When the minister goes into the pulpit, he is the shepherd in the act of feeding.²

With all else that it entails, shepherding primarily involves feeding and protecting the sheep. And both of these responsibilities are carried out in the same activity—the preaching and teaching of God’s Word!³

Through the course of church history, the nature of pastoral ministry evolved into quite a different animal. Around the beginning of the last century the primary work of the pastor ultimately gravitated from the preaching event to the hands-on care of people and the administration of church programs. Today, pastors seem to be more interested in being CEO’s, vision-casters, and large group counselors. While all of these functions may have their proper place in pastoral work, a consideration of a biblical philosophy of the role of the pastor cries out for a reformation. Specifically, it beckons us to return to the centrality of the preaching event in church growth and health, an event which is driven by a passion for the glory of God.

Exalt God, Don’t Just Resource Man

For the past three decades, my own Southern Baptist denomination has been embroiled in a theological controversy surrounding our view of the Bible. While some shortsightedly have

²Charles Jefferson, *The Minister as Shepherd* (Hong Kong: Living Books for All, 1980), 59, 61.

³See John MacArthur, Jr., “What is a Pastor to Be and Do?” in *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry*, ed. John MacArthur, Jr. (Dallas: Word, 1995), 28. The pastoral epistles are filled with exhortations to provide the flock with spiritual nourishment and to protect them from heresy, all via the instruction of right doctrine (see 1 Tim. 1:3-4; 3:1;

reacted to its political implications, the struggle largely has been a battle over the authority of the Scriptures. And it has been a battle that needed to be fought, for God's people in every generation must rise to guard and defend God's Word in the world. If we ever compromise the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible, we weaken the very foundation on which the church is built.

As I have watched this controversy unfold, however, I have often wondered if there are not other equally crucial issues regarding the Scriptures that have been overlooked, especially when it comes to pastoral preaching. I am thinking specifically of the essence and agenda of the Bible. I am fearful that these issues will not get anywhere near the billing or attention as has the authority issue. Hidden within these issues, however, is the understanding that the testimony *of God* was given primarily to exalt the Divine, not to resource mankind.

The Essence of the Bible

We live in a day in which people in churches are crying out for practical application and longing to see the relevance of the Bible. People have grown weary listening to sermons that only give them historical facts but provide them with no connection to real life. Such preaching is an abuse of the nature of the Bible.

Because we are a people of extremes, however, our humanity causes us to overreact to such abuses. And the result is that the pendulum swings to the opposite extreme of viewing the Bible merely as a resource manual for life on earth. And our infatuation with practical application has caused us to overlook the most important quality of the Bible—its *Divine feature*. We must understand that the Bible is theocentric, not anthropocentric. It is God-centered, not man-centered. That means it is a book about Him before it is a book about us. To

4:6-7,13-16; 5:17-18; 6:1-5,20-21; 2 Tim. 1:6-8,13-14; 2:1-2,8-9,14-16; 3:14-17; 4:1-5; Titus 1:7-14; 2:1,15).

make it otherwise is both selfish and arrogant. When we run quickly in our consideration of God's Word to the "how to" mentality of anthropocentricity, we often run right past the revelation of Almighty God in theocentricity. This perversion fits hand-in-glove with the order of contemporary culture: "It's all about me!"

The confusion regarding the essence of the Bible is compounded when applied to pastoral preaching, and the resulting deception is ever so subtle. Shepherds are ministers of grace and desire to meet people's needs and heal their hurts. But what happens when the Bible gives no specific and practical help for the life situations some of our people are facing? Among other things, the shepherd in his desire to help is tempted to find his preaching material from some place other than the Bible. Walter Kaiser lamented that many pastors have decided that using the Bible is a handicap for meeting the needs of the current generation and, therefore, "have gone to drawing their sermons from the plethora of recovery and pop-psychology books that fill our Christian bookstores."⁴ Worse yet, the shepherd lowers himself to making the Bible say things it does not say. In an attempt to offer practical and helpful information, he stands up to say "Thus saith the Lord" when the Lord did not saith! How can God get the glory if the preacher speaks other than what God says?

While the preaching described above cannot necessarily be categorized as heresy or even blatant error, neither can it be described as consisting of the inspired Word of God. In *Power in the Pulpit*, Jerry Vines and I described this subtlety as the often overlooked difference between *good stuff* and *God's stuff*.⁵ The body of truth that is revealed in the Bible, given for the purpose of godliness (see 2 Pet. 1:2-4) and righteousness (see 2 Tim. 3:16), can be called *God's stuff*. It is

⁴Walter Kaiser, "The Crisis in Expository Preaching," *Preaching* (September/October 1995): 6.

⁵Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 58-59.

the stuff of the Bible—its very essence. On the other hand, there is much helpful advice in life that is comprised of information or principles gleaned from simple observation and research. That is *good stuff*. Let us be very clear—the shepherd has not been charged with the task of speaking on all matters of *good stuff*.

While all truth is God’s truth, not all truth has been included in His written Word. He has sovereignly chosen to include only that which is necessary for man’s sanctification. There is a whole lot of good and helpful information in the world, but God did not choose to consecrate all of it as His inspired revelation necessary for spiritual transformation. In our previous work we cited the example of Aristotle, who delineated his principles of rhetoric simply by engaging in observation. He watched enough public speakers that he was able to glean certain “truths” for doing it effectively. The principles of rhetoric have had profound impact on preaching and all other forms of public speaking. But they are merely *good stuff*. Although they are both helpful and useful, they will not foster the God-life, much less glorify Him.

But the crisis we face in preaching today is not shepherds who deliver sermons on how to do good public speaking. The body of *good stuff* includes that which is of far more interest to contemporary church-goers. That is what makes it so tough. If a therapist observes enough people dealing with stress on the job place, he will glean certain helpful principles for addressing the issue. If a marriage counselor observes enough people journeying through divorce recovery, she will be able to develop some guidelines that are helpful for that crisis. If parenting experts talk with enough moms and dads who are raising kids, they will be able to outline some practical ways for navigating such a task. And there will always be certain general truths in Scripture which can be applied to these and other life experiences. But to say that all of these contentions are what God said is a huge stretch.

The shepherd's authority to stand and speak "Thus saith the Lord" is not in *good stuff*, but *God's stuff*. While biblical truth surely informs certain principles that might be categorized as *good stuff*, its primary intent is more specific and far-reaching. The faithful shepherd will rightly interpret, exegete, and proclaim the truth of Scripture so as to allow it to accomplish its purpose in people's lives. But when the shepherd prostitutes *God's stuff* for *good stuff*, anarchy occurs. And the biggest tragedy is not what people are *getting* but what they are *not getting*. While they certainly are getting some helpful information, they are being robbed of the truth that is necessary for realizing God's end and subsequently bringing glory to Him.

God's stuff is the very essence of the Bible. It is His book, and it primarily is about Him. When the preacher begins at this point in his interpretation and his application, then he is sure to exalt God and bring glory to His name. When he begins at the point of resourcing man regarding all of his questions and felt needs, however, his interpretation and application is certain to exalt humanity. Such is the high crime in the pulpit today!

The Agenda of the Bible

In addition to the essence of the Bible it is important for us to consider a second neglected issue, the agenda of the Bible. And Scripture's agenda is larger than merely resourcing mankind with pat answers and practical instructions. So it's not hard to find. In the study of Hebrew language there exists a literary construction called an *inclusio*. An *inclusio* is where the same or similar beginning and end of a segment of literature holds the key to interpreting what is in the middle. While it would be a stretch to say that the Bible is an *inclusio* in the technical sense, the idea is helpful in uncovering God's agenda. The Scriptures do tell us of a very similar concept that is exclusive to the beginning and ending of the Word of God.

Consider these ‘bookends’ of the Bible. The Bible opens with the declaration that “in the beginning God *created the heavens and the earth*” (Gen. 1:1). When the last pages of the Bible are turned, we behold the creation of “*a new heaven and a new earth*, for the first heaven and first earth had passed away” (Rev. 21:1). In essence creation and re-creation of heaven and earth serve to ‘prop up’ the rest of Scripture.

This construction pleads with shepherds and all who read the Bible to look closely at its middle to determine God’s agenda. And close consideration does not disappoint the diligent observer. At the risk of seeming like a Bible drill, let me take you on a journey that I believe reveals to us God’s agenda in the Bible. This agenda, furthermore, will provide a framework within which shepherds and sheep can approach sermons freely and confidently for God’s glory.

Our journey actually begins in eternity past. The apostle Paul told the Roman believers that the people whom God foreknew, “He also predestined *to be conformed to the image of His Son*, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified” (Rom. 8:29-30; emphasis added). Before time began, God determined to save believers from their sins and set them on a course to be shaped into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. Consequently, every believer is moving inescapably toward perfect righteousness as part of God’s plan for Christ to reign throughout all eternity over a holy race made up of people who are citizens of His divine kingdom and children in His divine family.

When we step on to the pages of recorded history in the Bible, we are immediately introduced to the same theme. The creation of a physical dwelling place was only part of God’s agenda. He determined to create for Himself an even more precious possession when He said, “Let Us make man in *Our* image, according to *Our* likeness; . . . So God created man in His *own*

image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:26-27; emphasis added). In the Garden of Eden, God set in motion a plan to share Himself with His highest creation in eternal communion. And the only way that was possible was for mankind to share in His likeness.

Something perverted God’s agenda, however. Genesis 3 tells the paramount tragedy of the fall of God’s precious creation. Sin entered the world and marred man’s likeness to his Creator. The divine image, which provided the link to eternal communion with the Almighty, was distorted. The magnitude of the catastrophe is expressed in God’s own words: “*Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever—*” (Gen. 3:22; emphasis added). Only the Creator Himself can handle the knowledge of both good and evil. Only He can navigate such an understanding without succumbing to their abuse. As God’s voice trails off of the pages of Scripture, the Bible reader is left with the distinct impression that God considered it absolutely unacceptable for mankind to remain in a state of corrupted likeness.

It is interesting to note the reference to the “tree of life” in this scenario. It is made without commentary or definition. The Bible first introduces it as the focal point of man’s home, planted by God “in the midst of the garden” (Gen. 2:9). While we may never know the complete nature of the tree of life this side of heaven, we can surmise that partaking of its fruit apparently would have caused God’s creatures to be cursed for eternity with the marred likeness to their Creator which characterized them at the time of consumption. This horrifying reality moved the gracious God to take action that would ensure the possibility of redemption. “So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen. 3:24).

What is incredibly fascinating, however, is that the tree of life noticeably disappears from the pages of God's Word after Genesis 3.⁶ And guess where it shows up next? All of the sudden it reappears in the new heaven and the new earth at the very end of the Bible! In his vision of the New Jerusalem the apostle John observed, "In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the *tree of life*, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:2). Amidst all of the mystery of the tree of life there exists an undeniable link between God's creation in Genesis and His re-creation in Revelation.

If the creation and re-creation of heaven and earth—with the tree of life in their midsts—serve as the bookends of the Bible, then the re-creation of mankind into the image of his Creator features as the content in between. Even the Old Testament writers, with their limited understanding of the resurrection, looked for some restoration of God's likeness. The Psalmist gladly acknowledged to God, "As for me, *I will see Your face* in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake *in Your likeness*" (Ps. 17:15; emphasis added). His words no doubt were a precursor to those of the apostle John who said, "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be *like Him*, for we shall *see Him* as He is" (1 John 3:2; emphasis added). And right on the heels of his vision of the tree of life in the New Jerusalem, John said of the saints, "They shall *see His face*, and His name shall be on their foreheads" (Rev. 22:4; emphasis added), an indication that they belong to Him (cf. Rev. 3:12; 7:3; 14:1).

⁶Other references to a "tree of life" do exist in the Bible outside of Genesis and Revelation, but they appear to be metaphorical as opposed to literal. See Proverbs, but 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4. The use of the definite article in the Genesis and Revelation references, and the absence of it in the Proverbs references, also support this distinction.

The writings of the apostle Paul also are pregnant with this theme. He told the Corinthians that “we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into *the same image from glory to glory*” (2 Cor. 3:18; emphasis added). He said to the Philippians that Christ Jesus “will transform our lowly body that it may be *conformed to His glorious body*” (Phil. 3:21; emphasis added). The Colossians were informed that they had “put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to *the image of Him who created him*” (Col. 3:10; emphasis added). Even Peter got in on the action, telling his readers that Jesus’ “divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be *partakers of the divine nature*” (2 Pet. 1:3-4; emphasis added).

Did you notice that almost all of these references associate the re-created nature to the glory of God? Without question the *inclusio* of the Bible suggests to us that God is about the business of creating for Himself a dwelling place and a companion race for all eternity, both of which will reflect His glory. Revealing this mission is the obvious agenda of the Bible. Consequently, the task of both shepherd and sheep is to align themselves with that agenda and approach the preaching event accordingly. When God’s agenda directs preaching in the church, then He is exalted and glorified.

Explain Revelation, Don’t Just Reveal Information

Several years ago a well-known preacher in Oklahoma climbed up in a tower on a vigil after announcing that God had told him that if people did not send him eight million dollars, He was going to kill him! To most of us that seems absurd, but only because we measure the claim

by the nature and oracles of God as revealed in the Bible. But what is the difference between that preacher's claim and the conservative evangelical shepherd who weights his sermons with declarations like "God told me" and "God is leading me" as authoritative underpinnings of extra-biblical information? Or what is the difference between his claim and the shepherd who draws the heart of his sermons from extra-biblical information as if to suggest that there are some things that God did not think about regarding the needs of His people? At best we are putting words in God's mouth and insinuating to listeners that they are His! Such a horrific thought demands that we give some attention to where and how the shepherd gets his message, what he is supposed to do with it when he gets it, and why it is so important that he does it.

A Revelation about Revelation

"Why don't you get your messages from God?" I don't remember ever being as shocked in all of my ministry as I was when asked that question several weeks into my second pastorate. I had begun my ministry there preaching systematically through a book of the Bible. On that day, one of my Sunday School teachers came by my office and posed that question. He said there was no way I could be getting my messages from God because I just preached each week from the passage which followed the one from the week before.

What confused me most about his inquiry was the fact that I thought I *was* getting my messages from God! Because I also had begun preparation for doctoral work simultaneous with my new church ministry, I was rising about three o'clock in the morning every weekday in order to have time for prayer, study, and sermon preparation before fulfilling the expected office hours and other duties of church administration. While there was always room for improvement, I really thought that I was going the extra mile to seek the Lord and be spiritually prepared to feed

His people. What I learned that day was that many people who make up our congregations (as well as many of their shepherds!) have a serious misunderstanding regarding the source of sermon content.

My Sunday School teacher went on to tell me that many of his previous pastors did not ever get their messages until they were on the way from their office to the pulpit on Sunday mornings! This “preacher as pope” mentality assumes that God has extra-biblical revelation for His people on a weekly basis, and that He communicates it to the shepherd through some mystical means that is often articulated as “getting a Word” from Him. In fact, many preachers and parishioners see this occurrence of omnipotent osmosis as displacing the need for Bible study and sermon preparation.

This notion is furthered by the looseness with which many preachers throw around those phrases like “God told me” and “The Lord said to me.” This scenario is frighteningly similar to God’s analysis of the prophets of Jeremiah’s day:

I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ How long will this be in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies? Indeed they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart, who try to make My people forget My name by their dreams which everyone tells his neighbor, as their fathers forgot My name for Baal.

“The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream;
And he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully.
What is the chaff to the wheat?” says the LORD.
“Is not My word like a fire?” says the LORD,
“And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?”

“Therefore behold, I am against the prophets,” says the LORD, “who steal My words every one from his neighbor. Behold, I am against the prophets,” says the LORD, “who use their tongues and say, ‘He says.’ Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams,” says the LORD, “and tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies and by their recklessness. Yet I did not send them or command them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all,” says the LORD (Jer. 23:25-32).

In addition to deceptively turning people's attention from the legitimate words of God, such preaching frustrates individuals who do not hear God as "audibly." These false shepherds imply that God has a steady diet of extra-biblical revelation that is necessary for His people's well-being, and that only they as the "Lord's anointed" can provide it. And this erroneous preaching results in reckless living that leads to no profit.

The nature of shepherding today involves the issue of credibility. If preacher's today can say "Thus saith the Lord," and by it place extra-biblical information on the same plane as scriptural truth, then our listeners have no standard by which to determine the validity of truth. If pastors today are still responsible for "getting a word from God" that no one has ever heard, then we have no basis by which to distinguish the one heralding heresy from the one transmitting truth. The example of the Bereans should be noted because they searched their Scriptures to see whether or not Paul's words could be substantiated by them (see Acts 17:11).

If we believe revelation is progressive and that God is still in the process of revealing information necessary for His people's spiritual well-being, then the Bible is no more than one among many sources from which the preacher draws an authoritative word from on high. But if the shepherd sees the Bible as God's total and final revelation of truth that is necessary for accomplishing His agenda, then his responsibility is simply to report it to the people. He is relieved from the mythical notion that he is responsible for revealing God's truth to people. Furthermore, he can spend his time learning to be a better reporter of biblical truth than a suave revelator of new information.

An Explanation about Explanation

The idea of a contemporary shepherd revealing new information obviously is the reflection of a very common, yet grossly non-biblical, theology of revelation and inspiration. And this error easily perverts people's understanding of the shepherd's responsibility as a preacher, especially if they do not process how preaching has evolved from being *revelatory* in the biblical period to being *explanatory* today.

We must understand that the role of the preacher in the post-apostolic age is of a fundamentally different nature than that of preachers in every preceding generation. This may be one of the most overlooked factors in determining models for contemporary homiletics (and hermeneutics, for that matter!). During the biblical period preachers like Jesus—as well as the Old and New Testament prophets and the apostles—often practiced what we might call *revelatory* preaching. They proclaimed God's first-time revelation as they spoke. In other words, they spoke information from God that man had never heard before. It was new stuff! Additionally, these preachers also did some *explanatory* preaching during their ministries. After new stuff from God had been given, they frequently provided explanation of the previously revealed information as people returned to it time and time again.⁷ Both their revelatory and explanatory preaching were characterized by Spirit-directed persuasion as they appealed to people to respond to God's words in the affirmative.

At the close of the biblical period, however, preaching naturally evolved to the point of only being explanatory in nature. The "apostles' doctrine" was canonized along with the Old Testament Scriptures to form our Bible. While continuing to be characterized by passionate persuasion, all post-apostolic proclamation possessed this explanatory nature as the essence of its very being. The closing of the canon evidenced the end of God's revelation of "new stuff"

regarding that which is necessary for true life and godliness (see 2 Pet. 1:4-5). Consequently, every preacher from that point forward ceased to have the responsibility of introducing—or *revealing*—new information from God. Post-apostolic preachers merely are under orders to explain that which God has already revealed and to persuade people to act on it.

Explanation of the biblical text is so vital because the Bible is the source of the knowledge of God’s truth (see 2 Tim. 3:14-17; 1 Pet. 2:2). The Word of God is both the road map that leads people to salvation and the food that fuels their re-creation into Christ’s image. How fast believers grow totally depends on how much truth they embrace and apply to their lives. And the only way they can get that truth is to understand it, either by studying it personally or by having someone explain it to them. Consequently, the ultimate end of explanation is to conform the believer to the image of the One who created him, and that only happens through the knowledge of God’s Word.

There will never be any growth in the Christian life apart from knowledge (see Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:22). *Holy living flows from mature knowledge, and mature knowledge comes only by explanation.* This suggests that the contemporary shepherd’s responsibility is not to “wow” his flock each week with something new that no one has ever heard before. Instead, he is to wrestle with the text of Scripture until he determines God’s intended meaning, help his people grasp it by way of clear and intentional explanation, and persuade them to act upon it through passionate persuasion.

⁷James F. Stitzinger, “The History of Expository Preaching,” in John MacArthur, Jr., *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, ed. Richard L. Mayhue (Dallas: Word, 1992), 38-42.

Today, people seem to be much more interested in personal experience, emotional feeling, and pragmatic application than explanation of the biblical text. The de-emphasis on explanation in preaching highlights the willingness of listeners to accept uninformed application

which they readily put to use in their lives. And many shepherds are more than ready to accommodate. As long as listeners identify with the message experientially, walk away with a better feeling about themselves and their lives, or glean some principle or instruction for dealing with their current circumstance, then no one is really concerned about whether or not it makes sense or is based upon truth. The only thing that will turn the tide will be for shepherd's to be faithful stewards of God's call to be explainers of His Word, and for those who listen to them to demand help in gaining such understanding.

Shepherds are no longer responsible for *revelatory* preaching, but solely responsible for persuasive *explanatory* preaching. The default approach to preaching is simply to explain and apply what God has already revealed in His Word.

An Understanding about Understanding

Explanation in contemporary preaching is not an end in and of itself, however. Explanation is a means to an end, and the end of the matter is understanding. The reason explanation is vitally important in preaching is because people must be helped to understand the truth of God's Word. Modern listeners do not need a new word from God. They need to understand the Word He has already given them! God's commentary on His children in Hosea's day was a direct rebuke of the shepherds who failed to help them know and understand His Word: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children" (Hosea 4:6). People's understanding of the Bible is critical in their relationships with God.

The relationship between understanding truth with the mind and a person's re-creation into Christlikeness is also crucial. Bill Hull observed that "transformation comes through the commitment of the mind. Without the proper knowledge and thinking we have no basis for personal change or growth. The mind is the pivotal starting place for change."⁸ And the great doctrines of the Bible imply that man has an inescapable obligation both to think and act on what he knows.

Both the Old and New Testaments underscore the necessity of understanding God's Word. During the great revival of Israel's worship recorded in Nehemiah 8, Ezra and the other teachers placed great emphasis on the people's understanding of the Scriptures. The text indicates that everyone "who could hear with understanding" and "who could understand" (Neh. 8:2-3) was gathered for the event. Men, women, and apparently some children were included in the service based upon their ability to understand what was to be spoken. Understanding was so important that the ability to comprehend the truth was at least one criterion for participation!

Further in the passage Nehemiah pointed out what the teachers did in order to explain the Scriptures so the people could understand with their minds. First, "they read distinctly from the book" (Neh. 8:8). They did not just "bottom line" the Scriptures. They knew it was important for people to make the connection between what the teachers said about each passage and what the people knew to be the authoritative document. Even in a biblically illiterate, postmodern culture there still is enough credence (though it may be just a token) given to the Bible that it merits showing people where you get your contentions. Making this connection is a key to explanation and right understanding.

⁸Bill Hull, *Right Thinking* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1985), 8.

Second, these teachers in Nehemiah “gave the sense” (Neh. 8:8), which is likely a reference to translating the Scriptures from Hebrew to Aramaic. In captivity, the Jews would have used Aramaic because it was the international diplomatic language of the day much like English is in our day. Consequently, part of the work of the Levites would have been to give the people an Aramaic translation. But “translation” always involves more than just moving from one language to another. All translations involve interpretation to some degree. And that is what these teachers did—they interpreted the Scriptures for the people so they could understand it. The root word here means “to break up” paragraph by paragraph. Essentially, these guys were revealing God’s intended meaning of the Scripture that had been covered up by language, time, culture, social setting, and other factors so that they “helped them to understand” (Neh. 8:8).

The New Testament follows suit with the same emphasis. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus were “foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken” (Luke 24:25). But then Jesus explained the Scriptures and helped them to understand them: “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:27). And right understanding of God’s Word makes supernatural impact, for “they said to one another, ‘Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?’” (Luke 24:32). God’s Word, rightly understood, does something to the human heart!

The Apostle Paul indicated that the Holy Spirit brings about life transformation by “the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). And he kept hammering the same thing home in his ministry to the Colossians, “warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus” (Col. 1:28). By receiving Christ as Lord and Savior, he told them, we “have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to

the image of Him who created him” (Col. 3:10). Consequently, he charged them to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another” (Col. 3:16).

Such is the responsibility of the contemporary Christian shepherd. His primary task is not to give opinions, indirect implications, or extra-biblical principles, but instead to reveal the Holy Spirit’s intended meaning in Scripture so that people’s minds are exposed to supernatural truth and their lives are transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. Right explanation and understanding are the beginning point of life transformation.

Edify the Church, Don’t Just Reach Seekers

For all practical purposes the modern church growth movement was launched in 1955 with the publication of Donald McGavran’s *Bridges of God*. By the end of the 1970’s a flood of other books, along with a host of seminars, conferences, programs, and organizations, were available to shepherds and church leaders. To say the least, the subject has monopolized the church’s attention since that time. Still today we seem to be consumed with learning, teaching, and discussing principles and methods that will produce church growth. While many of these efforts are to be commended, it is horrifying at times to observe the disconnect between some of them and the clear biblical teaching on the subject. One of the most disturbing trends in the contemporary church is displacing edification of the body with unchecked efforts to reach so-called seekers. It is not at all a stretch to say that this has become the order of the day.

Now before I venture any further into the present discussion, let me make something very clear. I am all about evangelism. I do not believe there is anything more important for individual believers or the church body to be doing during our time in this world than to be aggressively and passionately proclaiming Jesus as both God and Savior that men, women, boys, and girls might miss hell and make heaven. Doing evangelism and missions is just about the only thing in

which the church engages now that it will not be able to do a whole lot better when we get to heaven. That says to me that it ought to be a top priority for us right now. But the increasing popularity of seeker-driven methodologies and contradicting biblical teaching on the subject obligates shepherds and their people to ask two questions: *What is Jesus' strategy for church growth?* and *What is the role of the shepherd in that strategy?*

The Savior on Church Growth

When I was being interviewed by the leadership of the congregation I now have the privilege of shepherding, I was asked a similar question on a couple of different occasions—*What will you do to grow this church?* My answer was always the same. I told them that I could and would do nothing to grow the church. Such is a task that is beyond my human ability—and my biblical responsibility!

When Jesus, likely pointing to Himself, announced to Peter that “on this rock I will build My church,” He declared the most fundamental truth about church growth—it is His deal! Jesus made it very clear that He alone builds the church. Regardless of our good intentions, any claim that we make or effort that we put forth regarding growing a church is competing with the Lord.

Our modern obsession with church growth tells us differently. We outline strategies, hold seminars, develop training programs, all designed to enhance our supposed effectiveness in growing churches. And certainly it is possible to win converts to an organization, a movement, a cause, and especially to a personality. All it takes is some good business principles, personal charisma, human reason, or skillful persuasion. No one other than Jesus will ever be able to win someone to His church. Jesus said, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me” (John 6:37).

During my first pastorate I learned a lesson that has haunted me my entire ministry. I recall being with some of my fellow pastors on occasions when none of our church members were around, like weekly ministers' conferences and summer camps. As a young man in ministry, I remember being shocked to hear some of them use language or tell jokes that they would never think of letting their church members hear roll off of their lips. And some of these guys were pastoring large, growing churches. The thing that has stayed with me is the realization that—by all the standards we use to measure church growth—it is possible to be “successful” in ministry and all the time be doing it in the flesh! But authentic church growth is the sovereign work of Jesus Christ. Human effort can produce human results, but only Christ can produce divine results.

The early church is a testimony to the work of Christ in church growth. During his Pentecost sermon, Peter declared that Christ builds His church from “as many as the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39). While evangelism and church growth are mentioned in the narrative of the infant church, they do not show up until the very last sentence of the chapter when Luke notes that “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). The language of the New Testament here indicates that this growth was something enacted upon the church from an outside force, namely the Lord (see also Acts 5:14; 11:24).

As the gospel spread outside of Jerusalem, the same understanding was prevalent. When Paul and Barnabas preached at Pisidian Antioch, “as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). Jesus encouraged Paul when he was under pressure at Corinth by saying, “Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:9-10). The true and faithful preaching of the apostles was not even capable by itself of saving people and bringing them into

the church. Only those whose hearts had been sovereignly massaged by the truth of God's Word were added to the church.

Church growth is *His* doing. And any principle, program, strategy, or methodology that displaces His approach in any way actually is working against the efforts of Christ to build His church. If we want to see God build churches against which the gates of Hades will not prevail, we better be content with letting Him build them the way He has determined to do so.

The Shepherd in Church Growth

Healthy people make up healthy congregations, and Jesus seems to deposit the people He is saving into healthy congregations. The Apostle Paul expounded on the specifics of Jesus' plan for church growth and showed how nurturing the body's health contributed to its growth. He told them that Jesus

Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Eph. 4:11-16)

While acknowledging Jesus as the divine church grower, Paul expounds on the Master's plan by identifying its ultimate goal and the human instruments used to accomplish it. It involves the edification—*building up*—of His body into the His image through the ministry of His Word. That is what a shepherd can contribute to church growth—nourishing people to spiritual health by feeding them God's Word. The shepherd can't grow the church, but he can grow the people!

Paul introduces the gifted men whom Jesus gave to the church as catalysts for setting His plan in motion (see Eph. 4:11). The spiritual gifts given by Jesus to His church include both those gifts given to individual believers as well as those gifted men given to the church. The apostles and prophets, who were given strictly for New Testament times, were followed respectively by the gifted men called evangelists and pastor-teachers. These two offices are given for continuing ministry to the church. It is the plan of Jesus for evangelists and pastor-teachers to equip, build up, and develop His church as outlined in the rest of the passage. Along with evangelists, then, teaching shepherds are the agents that Christ uses to initiate the church growth process.

Jesus' plan for church growth is very simple: "equipping" leads to "the work of the ministry" which leads to "the edifying of the body of Christ" (see Eph. 4:12). The ignition point of this plan comes at the hands of evangelists and teaching shepherds in the equipping of God's people for service. As God's people are equipped for service, the by-product is the natural growth of the body into "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). This is the capsulization of Jesus' plan for church growth.

The language used to describe the specific activity which is assigned to these two office gifts further supports God's intention. In the language of the New Testament, the word translated "equipping" basically refers to that which is fit, restored to its original condition, or made complete. The word frequently was used as a medical term for the setting of bones, thus something that was put back like it was supposed to be. New Testament writers used it to describe both the spiritual maturity of the individual believer (e.g., 2 Cor. 13:11; Heb. 13:20-21) and corporate unification of the body (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:10).

All of this talk of restoration into an original condition should strike a familiar cord with us. Do you remember our earlier discussion about the agenda of the Bible and God's work of restoring His creation? Here Paul turns us on to how that plays out when the body gathers together. Evangelists and teaching shepherds are endowed with certain spiritual gifts that enable them to equip God's children for service. As they are equipped, each individual believer makes a contribution which "causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. 4:16).

The roles of these two office gifts are similar yet distinct. The evangelist, whose work has mistakenly been limited over the years to itinerant ministry, has a two-fold purpose. First and foremost, he is specially gifted to help people understand the gospel and lead them to receive Jesus as God and Savior. Second, the context of the passage indicates that he also is responsible for equipping God's people to do the same. Shepherds, or pastor-teachers, subsequently have the same responsibilities, yet with somewhat of a reversal of emphases. First and foremost, they are specially gifted to provide the leadership and spiritual resources that cause those who are being saved to be conformed into the image of Christ. Second, they are called upon to do the work of the evangelist (see 2 Tim. 4:5). Together, these two offices serve as the primary equipping platforms for authentic church growth.

The Stewardship of Church Growth

Jesus' model also makes so much more sense when it comes to the stewardship of the church's energy and resources. We hear much today about targeting the most number of lost people. Many churches are relocating to rapidly growing areas where there are large pockets of the population. Other churches speak of tailoring worship services to make them more palatable

to seekers. Certainly the evangelistic motive behind such efforts is commendable. But the question must be asked, *Where will the most number of lost people always be, inside or outside the church?* The answer is obvious. As strategically located as our churches may be, as seeker-friendly as we may make them, reality is that most lost people will never darken the doors of our church buildings.

Consequently, the church is much better served in applying most of its evangelistic energy and resources to preparing believers to penetrate the marketplace with the gospel. The most number of lost people will be confronted with the gospel as God's people are educated and equipped for proclaiming Jesus as Savior and God in the marketplace. Such is the Great Commission—"As you go, make disciples" (cf. Mat. 28:19; author's paraphrase). This should include motivation and training for both personal witness and public proclamation. And our changing culture is going to require us to think strategically about how to gain a hearing in the various venues of the church scattered, not simply coloring outside the lines but thinking of new colors. When the church comes together, however, it is wise to apply most of its energy and resources to the authentic worship of the living God by His people, including their edification through the teaching of the Bible.

A Final Word . . .

So, we find ourselves staring at the magnitude of the shepherd's stewardship in church growth—the proclamation of *God's stuff* as opposed to mere *good stuff*. Our most earnest effort should be given to preaching the Bible by "warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man *perfect* in Christ Jesus" (Col. 1:28; emphasis added). So "preach the word," beloved shepherd! "Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke,

exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). And dear church member, replace your itching ears with a hunger and thirst for righteousness. Together, then, shepherd and people will be sure to edify and build up the body into the image of Christ according to His plan for church grow.