

THE FORMATION AND FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

Taught by Bruce Bickel

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Our Father, we're just overwhelmed with the difficulties of this world, yet the magnificent freedom and power we have in the blood of the Lamb. Thank you, father, that you have rescued us through the payment of a price at the cross. Father, during the midst of all of these difficulties of life, in our own country and around the world, we have to recognize the great joy that we have of being one in Christ Jesus and the fellowship we have. We thank you for these men, their faithfulness, their families. We pray that you'd bless all of them. We thank you for Darlene Turner, her ministry to us and her ministry to you by transcribing that which we learn from you on these Friday mornings. We pray that you'd be an encouragement to her heart and let her know of our gratitude for her ministry to you and the value that it brings to us. Father, we just humbly pray that your Holy Spirit will fulfill his job description as he does every day and every Friday and every moment, and that is to guide us into all truth, and may it be so for Jesus' sake, as well as for your glory. Amen.

Brothers, you have handout #6. Now this going to be, what we're going to do the rest of the time, we're going to study this theme which is the formation and function of the church. This is going to be the outline that we're going to follow. Now I'm borrowing this outline from friend of mine by the name of Mark Dever, who is the Pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington D.C. He's done a wonderful work on what is a really healthy church, and so I'm following his outline. I'm going to give a lot more than what he does, but this is the outline we're going to be following.

I'll give you handouts probably on a week or bi-weekly basis that will allow us to go in-depth under each of these subjects, but this is the way were going to take a look at this. If you'd be kind enough to open up your notes to number six, and just keep this and bring this every week, and I'll give you additional ones as Sig sends it out to you on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

First of all, we want to talk about, today, and begin this theme about looking at our subject matter, what is a healthy church. Now I use the word healthy because it really tries to get the idea that the church is a living body. Now we have seen in our previous studies how the Lord formed the church. We saw that in Ephesians 1 and 2. We saw how he created the church through the doctrine of election and all those things. We looked at that to the formation of the church. Now we're beginning to talk specifically about the visible expression of the body of Christ in the local church setting. That's why we're looking at this idea from a healthy church perspective.

Now I do need to say this. My background has been more in the independent evangelical reform movement than it has been under a denominational. The things that I share with you of my past pastoral experience in Kansas and Chicago, you need to understand that I did not have the difficult traditions of some denomination over my head that gave me the great freedom to create our own traditions, and so I want to help you understand that. I'm not suggesting when I give you an illustration of what I did as a senior pastor that that's what you need to go tell your senior pastor to do. I'm not suggesting that. I just want you to understand that I had the freedom.

Now there are some tremendous freedoms in the independent evangelical reform movement. There are some tremendous freedoms there, but there are also some tremendous liabilities and limitations, and those have to be overcome, and I think we can deal with some of those as we move through this study.

This is going to be the outline that we're going to follow probably for the next year. Then we'll just go into each of these topics very, very in-depth to help us understand the application.

The important thing for us, brothers, is to continue asking ourselves the question, “What am I going to do about what I learn?” Remember, this is not an opinion thing that we’re talking about. We trust that the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth, and the real onus on us, our responsibility, is a responder aggressively to what the Holy Spirit reveals, is to ask the question, “What am I going to do about what I just learned?”

As we move into the understanding of the biblical description of a healthy local church, we need to understand that the word healthy really implies that the body is alive. It also implies that the idea that it is still growing to maturity. It’s not a perfect church. A healthy church is not a perfect church. But it’s a church that continually takes God’s side against themselves, against sin and against the deceits of the world’s system. That’s a healthy church.

We need to understand that when we use the word healthy, we’re saying it’s alive, it’s breathing, it’s active, it’s growing, it’s maturing, but it’s not perfect yet. We need to realize that if you want the perfect church, then don’t join it, because the moment you join it, it will no longer be perfect...if it were perfect.

So that’s to be the idea that I’m using this phrase “healthy church.” It’s a church that continually strives to conform itself to God’s Word. That’s one of the definitions of a healthy church. If you really want to look at a summary statement, a healthy church, then, is a congregation or an assembly or gathering of people that increasingly reflect God’s character as revealed in his Word. That’s a healthy church. That’s the definition of that I’m using. It is a church that reflects God’s character as his character has been revealed in his Word.

I’m not saying that this is the perfect definition for a healthy church, but it’s the one that I’m using in our study. There are other ways that we could express that, but essentially, what we want to look at this and say, “A healthy church is a church that reflects God’s character as his character is revealed in the word.” The critical ingredient there, “his character as revealed in the word.” Not our opinion. This is not our coming up with a God of human imagination; it’s the God of biblical revelation. Our definition of a healthy church is a church that increasingly reflects God’s character as his character is revealed in his Word. That’s what we’re going to study over the next several months.

Now I think there’s some essential indicators. You’ll look at your handout number six. I list these attributes of a healthy church in two different categories. First of all, what I’m saying are the essential ones and then the important ones. Now they’re all important, and they’re all essential, and you could arrange them however you want. There’s no magical order. This is just the way that I’ve organized the material, biblically, that we’re going to be looking at.

I want us to take a look at the first three, what I’m calling essential indicators of a healthy church that is reflecting God’s character as his character is revealed in his Word. Those three essentials are, first of all, expository preaching. We’re going to talk about that today, and probably next week.

Then we want to talk about biblical theology. An essential ingredient of a growing church that is reflecting God’s character as his character is revealed in the Word is biblical theology. What do we mean by that? We’re going to go into depth to understand what that means.

The third thing is a biblical Gospel. There’s a lot of synthetic gospel presentations being taught. I think one of the three essential elements of a healthy church would be, first of all, expository preaching. Secondly, biblical theology. And thirdly, a biblical Gospel.

Let’s take a look at what we mean by those essential elements. First of all, one of the essential elements that I think is paramount for a healthy church is expositional or expository preaching. In other words,

reflecting God's character as his character is revealed in the word means that we start with his word, the Scripture, to define what is essential in a healthy church.

In Paul's second letter to Timothy, in 2 Timothy 2, he tells him, the pastor at the church of Ephesus, and we talked about this a few weeks ago, that the Bible would equip him for every good work. That's 2 Timothy 3:16-17. All Scripture is God inspired and profitable for four things—for doctrine or teaching, for reproof or correction and training in righteousness, so that you will be qualified and equipped for every good work.

Now where are you going to find what every good work is? You're going to find that in the Scripture. That's what he's telling Timothy. He's saying, "Timothy, as the pastor of a church. You're going to find what every good work is, it's going to be as a result of your understanding the Scripture." Now if we think that there's something that we should be doing, that is not found in God's Word, then Paul's a liar, and what he told Timothy was incorrect, because then Scripture would not equip us for every good work, as Paul says that it would, and we should then look elsewhere or outside the Scriptures to do the latest thing. That's where we get into trouble. We get into trouble when we start looking outside the Scripture as a means of finding what is the latest thing, the latest fad that we should be doing.

The church of God that really wants to reflect the character of Christ as he is revealed in the Scripture will live, grow and mature exclusively through listening to God's Word. Now it's that simple. In reality, there are only two kinds of churches—those who listen to God's word and those who don't. Now that's it. Those are essentially the two kinds of churches that exist. There are those that do listen to his word because they understand this—that you will be equipped for every good work through the Scripture, because it's all inspired by God and its profitable for four things, applicationally, in your life. It might reveal to you new doctrine, a new standard. It might reveal to you a correction. It might reveal to you an error. It might reveal to you the prevention of making the same error again.

It's in that context that Holy Spirit applies what we learn biblically. A church that is going to be healthy, that is going to reflect God's character as his character is revealed in the word, is going to be a church, a gathering, a fellowship of people who listen to his word, and there are only two kinds of churches—those that listen and those that don't. Unfortunately, in our culture, we have more who don't than those who do.

When you look at 2 Timothy 3, that whole passage, I would encourage you to read that. This is something the Lord just impressed upon me recently, and I might create a series on this, but when you look at 2 Timothy...turn with me there for a moment...2 Timothy 3. He starts off in verse 1, "But understand this," Timothy, "that in the last days there will come times of difficulty." That word, difficulty, is sort of a weak translation. The word really is perilous. There are perilous times. Now when you read, there's a list of 19 vices, after verse one, that describe a definition of a culture that is involved in perilous times. Guys, when you read that, that is the United States of America. Read it. That is our culture. Look at those 19 vices, and that is us.

I think the most difficult place/location in the world to have any significant Christian impact is in the United States of America. It's far more difficult than to do it in Africa, in Kenya, in Asia, Hong Kong or China, because they don't have all of those cultural things that are imbuing them in this setting up a standard of living. Look at those 19 things. That's the U.S. of A. People always ask me, "When are you going to go on the mission field?" I think I'm in the most difficult mission field/location in the world, and that's in the U.S. of A. We are the most third world spiritually bankrupt culture in the world. That's it. Look at 2 Timothy 3. Look at those 19 vices. That's us. We have the most difficult time because we're in perilous times.

Let me give you an illustration. There's going to be a lot for celebration and honoring those who gave their lives during the tragic events of 9/11. It is my understanding that at the celebration in New York City that no mention of God or anything spiritual can be related. You can't mention God. You can't mention Christ. Nothing of any religious context other than generalities of the force be with you or whatever you want to call it. Something generic. Now that's our country. We can't mention the person and work of Christ at an event that nearly destroyed us, at least for a small period of time. That's 2 Timothy 3. We're in perilous times.

I also understand that at Shanksville, they're going to have a celebration over there. You can only mention some reference to something spiritual, but you can't mention anything specific about God, Christ or Jesus at all.

***Audience Member:** There is, I had the website sent to me on this. It shows, it's actually a video, of what they're building in New York. One of the rescue people came upon [UNCLEAR] cross.*

Yes, I've seen that.

***Audience Member:** Are you aware of that?*

Yes.

***Audience Member:** That will be there.*

They're going to have a cross there, but my point is this. Our culture is now so tolerant of everybody and everything that we're in perilous times. I think the most difficult, physical location on the face of the earth to have any significant ministry is the United States. We'll talk about this down the road.

Take a look at all those 19 vices, and look at the first one—lover of self. Look at that. Lover of self. “People will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents.” We talk a lot about child abuse. When are we going to have somebody start a ministry of parental abuse? I see all kind of kids killing their parents with their mouth. Just the pure character and they're disobedience to their parents. But anyway, look at that, but that's us. We're in perilous times.

As we look at this study of the church, there are only two kinds of churches, guys. There are those who listen to the word and those who don't. I hope that as we study this, we will be men who will go back into our churches and make sure that we hold our elders, our deacons and our pastors accountable to be preaching the word expositively, but that's where a healthy church starts. If you really want to be a church that's going to reflect the character of God as his character is revealed in the Scripture, you gotta listen to the word, because that's where you're going to find every good work.

Notice some of the verses that...you talk about the value of Scripture. Notice Mark 4:4 and Jesus' final words to his disciples in Matthew 28, “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel.” Look at all the number of verses that talk about the value of Scripture and it's being preached.

We have to start to say that the very first indicator of a healthy church is expositional preaching. Let me explain what that means. First of all, the church finds its life, its purpose, as it lives out the Scripture and displays his character to a lost world. We don't find out what God's will is, we are found in God's will. We spend too much time trying to find it out, when we ought to be asking ourselves, “Am I in it?” A church will find itself in God's will to the degree that it listens to his word and displays God's character as its revealed in the Scripture.

Simply put, that means this—that the church much listen to and then echo the Scripture. It's not to create some new paradigm, become relevant, develop strategies or become sensitive to the culture. Yes, those are things that we need to be aware of, but that is not how we gain our life. It's job is to figure out how to be faithful to what they have learned from the word and what they hear in the pulpit. All ministry starts in the pulpit, guys. That's where everything starts. The degree to which you have the exposition of the Scriptures in the pulpit will be the degree to which your church will be healthy or unhealthy.

I've divided some of these elements, these essential elements of the marks of a healthy church, and then listed some important ones after that, but there are several ways of doing it. This is just the way that I'm doing it myself. All of these are critical components to a healthy church, but if you remove these first three—expositional preaching, biblical theology and the biblical Gospel—you can watch the church's health decline. It will decline to the degree that these first three are not paramount. In compromising these first three—expositional preaching, a biblical theology and a biblical Gospel—the church essentially is trying to be wiser than God because they're basically saying, "We're going to go outside of the place where we find every good work because the world's system is wiser to know how to reach the world's people." That would be like going to a restaurant where they offer food but only show you pictures. Or go to a car dealer who has a great sale, but only offers you a picture. You see, there are only two kind of churches—those that listen and those that don't.

How is it you listen? It starts with expository preaching. What do I mean by that? Well, for a healthy church to really reflect God's character, the obvious place to start is to what are you hearing from the pulpit? Expositional preaching is essentially exposing Scripture. It's literally what it means—exposing the Scripture. It takes a certain passage, explains it and then makes applications of the meaning of that passage to the congregation or to the assembly.

There are many types of preaching. You've got topical preaching, you've got historical preaching, you've got biographical preaching, and all of them can be appropriate at the right time, and they can be applied at specific times when there's a need. But it's really a steady diet of expositional preaching, that is exposing the Scripture, that produces life in the flock. It presumes, then, that what God says is authoritative, and it assumes that this is what people should hear; not necessarily what they want to hear, but what they need to hear.

Expository preaching is not so much about what the pastor says, but it's this—it's really about how a preacher decides to say what he's going to say. That's expositional preaching. Why is it you chose to say what you said? If it's expositional preaching, it's because the Scripture said that's what you're to say. That's what exposing the Scripture is. It's not so much what he says as it is how he decided to say what he was he was going to say from the pulpit. That's expositional preaching. It's Scripture determining what is said or something else determining it. When Scripture determines what you say, that's expositional preaching.

The best model of that, pretty much, is taking verse by verse by verse, and so that you always keep things in the right context. In other words, you have to look at why is the word therefore there for. Classic example would be Romans 12:1, "Therefore through God's mercy," since we have God' mercy, "do not conform to the system of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." What does the word therefore mean? It means refer to the first 11 chapters. Where are you going to find the description of God's mercy? You're going to find that in the first 11 chapters of Romans. Now you understand the application, but you've got to understand the first 11 chapters. You just don't pick a verse and start preaching on it. You've got to keep things in the right context. That's what expository preaching is. But it's really this—why is it the pastor, the preacher, decided to say what he said? That's expositional preaching. Is it something outside of the Scripture or is it the Scripture itself?

God's people have always been created by his word. Notice, from creation in Genesis 1, the most important verse in the Bible in my opinion, is Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning, God." If you don't understand that, John 3:16 doesn't make any sense. But once you understand that, "In the beginning, God," all of a sudden, you read the rest of it, you understand the whole concept of redemption, being rescued through the payment of a price.

God has always created with his word. How did he create the universe? He spoke. It was his word that was the generating force to the call of Abram in Genesis 12. He created to the vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37. He created through his word. To the coming of the Living Word, Jesus Christ, in John 1, he spoke through his word. God creates through the spoken word, and a church that's going to grow and be healthy is going to grow because they're listening to the spoken word. That's preaching. That's expositional preaching. It's not talking from Reader's Digest and giving movie reviews. It's preaching the word. It's exposing the Scripture. If a church really wants to be serious about reflecting the character of God as his character is revealed in the Scripture, they're going to have to listen to it. Guys, that starts in the pulpit.

You see, God has always created his people by his word. Sound expositional preaching is the fountain head and the beginning and the end all of a healthy, growing church. It's got to start in your pulpit.

Coop: To your point, if a high paid priest, standing in front, he's being expositional, he's confronting [UNCLEAR] people with their sin, so if he's paid a lot, he thinks about comfort and it becomes a comfort club and not a congregation.

Well that's very possible. Certainly that's true.

Coop: If you make somebody uncomfortable...

Let me tell you...four things...

Audience Member: I think in response to what you said [UNCLEAR]...the governing, the [UNCLEAR] what is said, and where it is said is the Holy Spirit.

No question.

Audience Member: The Holy Spirit will determine if it is fire and brimstone or whether it's a pat on the head.

That's right.

Audience Member: What is required, what is needed at the moment, will be determined by the Holy Spirit.

Absolutely right. That's why God always uses the word to create because it is the role of the Holy Spirit to what? Guide you into all truth. That's his role. His role is to guide you into all truth. That truth has to be preached so the Holy Spirit will act and comfort, he might convict, he might convince, and he might control. It's one of those things he's going to do. We have to let the Holy Spirit do that, but he's going to do that through the preached word. That starts in the pulpit.

I want to take you to a passage to examine some of this for a moment. Go to 1 Corinthians 1, beginning at verse 17. Now by contrast, before I read this...let me read this passage to you. 1 Corinthians 1:17-25. This is Paul writing to the church at Corinth, and this is what he said about his calling as a preacher. 1

Corinthians 1:17, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.”

I want to spend some time helping us understand that. Let me contrast that to a recent event that occurred at the Christian Music Association National Conference, where one of the breakout sessions was a group called The National Drama Puppetry and Clowning Festival Group. Here was their conclusion—drama is the most effective method of presenting the Gospel to the people of today because they are so in tune with the visual. Drama? Let me see what Paul said. I don’t see the word drama, puppetry or clowning involved in what Paul says his calling is, but that’s what the world offers today in the United States of America in our Christian culture. Puppetry, clowning and drama.

Don: I was at a worship service a number of years ago, and the, a lot of the worship service was taken on by a skit, and it was like a comedy act of some kind, something about the deacons of the church wanting to raise funds for something, and I thought, you know, I could have stayed home and watched Comedy Central if I wanted that, you know, and yet, at some churches, that is the thinking—it’s dramas, its videos, it’s comedy or whatever, you know, it’s [UNCLEAR] preaching.

Now notice, Don’s right. You see, today, sermons are viewed as the pony express method of delivering the Gospel in an age of faxes, iPhones, iPads and modem. In other words, the pony express is the old, archaic ancient way of doing it.

A friend of mine was teaching a course in London to a group of pastors. He made the statement, “Back in the Puritan times, often times, their sermons lasted an hour to an hour-and-a-half.” A young pastor raised his hand and said, “How much time did they leave for worship?” Well, what do you think preaching was? You see, the mindset is this. Look at the way that we organize our church bulletins. You have praise and worship. And what do we do? We sing, we sing, we sing, we pray, we worship, and then down here at the bottom of the page, we have sermon. It’s almost like worship is what the musicians do. Worship is the praise of what we do. But now we’ve got to marginalize something and we’re going to call the rest of the activity, we’re going to call it a sermon. What do you think a sermon is? The sermon is the height of the worship. If you’re going be a church that really wants to reflect the character and nature of God as his character is revealed in Scripture, worship is going to center around the sermon, not thank you music. Not the drama, not anything else. Now that doesn’t mean that we don’t have confessions and prayer and read the Scripture and sing and praise. I’m not saying we don’t do that. I’m saying yes, we do, but I’m saying the centrality of any worship service in a healthy church is going to be what happens in the pulpit. What’s more important? For God to hear us sing off key or for us to hear him speak to us through the Holy Spirit?

Audience Member: Speak to us.

Speak to us. It’s worship. The primacy of worship is the preaching. It’s the pulpit. It’s not the musicians.

Don: [UNCLEAR] play devil's advocate, hopefully not [UNCLEAR] ...if we just had preaching...and you spoke of this about a minute ago, I know what you're going to say, and I agree, but if we...I think all are important...if we just had preaching and we didn't have prayer or singing or whatever, I don't think that would constitute a good worship service either.

No, we're going to get into what is a good worship service. You've got to have balance. My point is I'm exaggerating this purposely to get your attention to realize the contrast of so many churches, what they do and what they call worship compared to what it ought to be biblically. That's what I'm trying to do. I'm going to extremes and saying look at what much of our churches offer, when really, there's got to be balance. We're going to get into that. We're going to talk about what is biblically oriented, directed worship. We'll get into that. All I'm saying right now is our essential, first of all, to be a healthy church is you've got to have expositional preaching as the priority because when you remove that, all sorts of other things start happening.

Watch the decline of a church. When you do not have expositional preaching, a biblical theology and a biblical Gospel, you can watch the church go down the tubes. When those three things essentially are removed, you get, people start thinking that we are wiser than God because we're going to create a new paradigm; we're going to create a new thing.

Audience Member: *I was thinking that on the night that Jesus had the last supper, before they went to the garden for him to pray, they sang some hymns.*

Certainly.

Audience Member: *And then they left. So the music is a part of it...*

It's part of it.

Audience Member: *...it's not the focus. [UNCLEAR]...*

We'll get into all of this. Now, the thing we're going to talk about now, for the next couple of weeks, is going to be expository preaching, so I want take you to this passage. Go to 1 Corinthians 1:17 again. We need to understand the context of these verses. In the previous verses, Paul says their expressions of loyalty to teachers and preachers replaced their commitment and loyalty that Christians must give to Christ alone. That's what you see in verses 1-16. You gotta understand the context what, where 17 picks up, "He's saying you've got too much loyalty to your preachers. You've got too much loyalty to me, to the other apostles. It ought to be to Christ."

Now go to verse 17. He explains that his apostolic calling was not to baptize to get people into the church, but to preach, and then he proceeds to give reasons, in the following section that I just read, why he renounced the use of methods of professional public speakers.

Notice the phrase, "eloquent wisdom." Let me give you some historical background on this. A 1st century orator or public speaker was expected to produce some sort of carefully crafted speeches, which would draw attention to himself by his use of skillful, verbal rhetoric. Oratory was called magic because it was seen to bewitch the hearers. The content of the speech was immaterial. It didn't make any difference what you said. The only thing that was important was the performance that mattered. They spoke to gain the adulation of their audiences. That's what he means when he uses that phrase, "and do not speak with words of eloquent wisdom." He's referring to these eloquent speakers of rhetoric who gained attention to their audiences, not because of their content, but because of their style of delivery.

Paul used none of those orators' tricks, he says, of the trade, for he did not preach with words of human wisdom. Literally that phrase, "words of human wisdom," literally means by means of the wisdom of rhetoric. By means of the wisdom of rhetoric.

For him to have adopted these secular conventions and styles of rhetoric preaching and teaching would have promoted the speaker—himself—on whose performance the audience would sit in judgment, not of the content, but of the presentation. Didn't have enough humor. Didn't smile. Whatever it may be. You see, the whole thing was to call attention to the one was the orator, the one who was using this wisdom of rhetoric. Paul says none of that. That's not his calling.

You see, this would have diverted the attention away from the cross to Paul himself. Now that's the context of these verses. You've got to read the 1st chapter to understand this. He's saying, "You're spending too much time giving adulation to the person you're listening to. And when you do that, it takes away from the message, which is the cross." You see, brothers, the greatest weapon our church has is not the skill of your preacher; it's the message of the preacher. It's the content. So Paul says, "I don't do any of that." And preaching should not do any of that. Paul says, "If I had done that, then I would be robbing my hearers," the audience, the congregation, "of the opportunity to hear about the amazing event by which God saves people, and that's through the cross."

The authoritative message is called the Gospel. It has its content is the cross of Christ. And Christ, he says, sent him. Notice verse 17, "For Christ did not send me." There's an old expression, "many people went but few are sent." Do we have the right people in the pulpits? What type of training do they have to be in the pulpit? Who called them to be in the pulpit? Who sent them? You see, we've got to look at that verb. Paul says this, "Christ did not send me to be an orator, to be a person of wise rhetoric. He sent me to do one thing, and that was to preach the Gospel," because its in that that is the power that permits a church to grow and become healthy and alive. That's expository preaching.

Let's take a look at the definition of preaching. Essentially the definition of preaching is proclamation. In the very broad sense, it could be a personal conversation. It could be giving an evangelistic book or a tract. It could be teaching a Sunday school class. It could be sharing your testimony. It could be writing a letter. There are many ways in which you and I can proclaim the Gospel of Christ. The question is what is the content of what I'm proclaiming? That's what we need to center in on.

Notice what Paul says in these verses. The key word in this paragraph is wisdom (verses 17-25). He uses that word eight times. Read the passage, verses 17-25, and you'll see that he uses the word wisdom eight times. The key idea that Paul tries to express here is that we dare not mix man's wisdom with God's revealed message. Notice, the entire section on wisdom, which is 1 Corinthians 1:17 all the way through 1 Corinthians 2:16, presents a number of contrasts between the revealed word of God and the wisdom of man. Notice, God's wisdom is primarily revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ, but not everybody sees that. The primary way in which God reveals his wisdom is through the cross. Now that's contrary to what man's wisdom is oriented toward rhetoric. Literally it means not with the discourse or conversation characterized by wisdom, that is the contents of which was human wisdom instead of truths revealed by God.

Now he says, "that's folly to people," when you say that God's wisdom is revealed at the cross. That's folly to people. They're not going to understand that. We need to understand that's what Paul is saying. He says, "You got to realize, folks, the people are going to be gravitated to, drawn to, rhetoric expressions of man's wisdom," but that is folly, because God's wisdom, which is what a healthy church ought to be listening to, really comes from the cross being preached, and that's where we have to trust the Holy Spirit to be the applier of the truth. What is the Holy Spirit's job description? To guide us into

all truth. That's where we have to let the Holy Spirit be the applier of that which we hear from pulpits.

Now in this whole connection, Paul contrasts two kinds of wisdom. First of all, he describes one as the wisdom of this world—the wisdom of men, or the wisdom of the rulers of the world. By this, he means human wisdom, that which we figure out ourselves, which has as its origin human thought, and so he pronounces this to be folly and declares it to be entirely ineffective in bringing salvation to the lost.

He calls the other kind of wisdom, the contrast, is the wisdom of God, and that is wisdom, truth that is derived from God, not from man as its origin, and that is the hidden wisdom consisting in the truths that human reason can never discover apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. You've got to realize, guys, that sometimes without the work of the Holy Spirit, they're never going to understand you. That's why you can't change anybody's life.

One of the first things I had to realize as a pastor is I can't change anybody's life, but I sure had the greatest weapon that can do that, and that is proclaiming a biblical Gospel—the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, the person and work of Christ and repentance and faith, and with that, the Holy Spirit will apply it where he will apply it. That's his job. I should not try to be the Holy Spirit and think that I can change anybody. The sooner you realize you can't convert anybody, change anybody's life, the more powerful you're going to be.

***Audience Member:** And to whom I should share it with...*

That's right.

***Audience Member:** [UNCLEAR]...*

To whom do we share it? Whom do we preach it? Whom do we proclaim? Now, the former, he says, the wisdom of man, is ineffective in bringing about salvation. He says that he didn't come to preach the teaching of human reason, but the testimony of God. That's expositional preaching.

Now notice, he was among them, not as a philosopher, but as a witness. And what was he a witness of? The cross. That's why he says we preach Christ and him crucified. Now any church that says they want to be healthy and they want to be a church that's continually growing, maturing, to reflect the character of God as his character is revealed in the Scripture, is going to start with a commitment to expositional preaching. It starts right there.

Next week, I want to take you through some more understanding of preaching, biblically, and we'll take a look at the ordination of preaching. We'll look at the content of preaching. Then we'll look at our response to preaching. And then we'll look into our second issue, which will be biblical theology.

Guys, the three critical ingredients, in my judgment, for a healthy church, have got to be these three, things, because when you remove one, two or three of these elements, watch the church decline, and that is, first of all, expositional preaching, a biblical theology, and a biblical gospel. May God give us the courage to hold our elders and our pastors accountable for the essential truths that will help us become a growing, mature, live church.

Let's pray. Father, we sometimes think that we are so smart, and that we think that we can read people and know what they need, and so we go about using all sorts of different means to attract, when our calling is to proclaim. Now that doesn't mean, Lord, that we're not sensitive to people and their needs. Certainly we are. We've got to recognize the different environments where you will take us to proclaim the Gospel of Christ, but help us realize, Father, wherever it is, there's only one thing we're going to

say, and that is Christ and Him crucified and how your Holy Spirit will lead us to do this, we have to trust you. You will give us the words. Father, just help us be committed to, not being philosophers, but being witnesses of the message of the true Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and may it be so for your glory. And all God's men said...Amen!