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Becoming His Work By Hearing His Word: A Gospel Communication Plan For Bellwether Church

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Becoming His Work By Hearing His Word - A Gospel Communication Plan For Bellwether Church

John Tate

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Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

BECOMING HIS WORK BY HEARING HIS WORD
A GOSPEL COMMUNICATION PLAN FOR BELLWETHER CHURCH

Written by

JOHN HUGH TATE


and submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary

upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:



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BECOMING HIS WORK BY HEARING HIS WORD
A GOSPEL COMMUNICATION PLAN FOR BELLWETHER CHURCH

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

JOHN HUGH TATE
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ABSTRACT

A Gospel Communication Plan for Bellwether Church

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Doctor of Ministry

School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

2018

The goal of this study is to develop a communication plan for Bellwether Community Church. It is argued throughout the paper that this church, located in the Bible Belt, needs a comprehensive program to assist its congregation in living out the gospel through discipleship, apologetics, and evangelism. This program is implemented in Bellwether Community Church over a two-year timeframe.

This program emphasizes preaching as the primary means of communication and the overall plan focuses on the preaching series. However, preaching is only one means of the plan, as it also includes intentional equipping classes, small group curriculum, written devotions, and creative works of writing. All these forms emphasize an increased aptitude for the congregation in apologetics, evangelism, and discipleship. The goals for the church are to have a unity of communication over the course of the program, the congregation to be unified in its participation, individual participants to grow in the areas of apologetics, discipleship, and evangelism, and the church to grow in greater knowledge of Scripture and outreach into its local community.

Prior to the program's launch, time is given for prayer and planning, engaging staff, leaders, and members in discussion, and preparing small group leaders to facilitate curriculum. Upon its launch, there is a centralized focus on the program's teaching and consistent encouragement for the church to engage in all its aspects. There are assessments of the program where participants give feedback and church leaders can see its effectiveness. Upon completion, this overarching program can impact discipleship within any church community. It can also be modified for this church in its next season and offered to other churches for use.

Content Reader:

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To my Grandmother, Frances Stroud Hill, who always encourages and prays for me.
This Doctor of Ministry Final Paper is most of all for her.

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PART ONE
MINISTRY CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

Bellwether Church was founded in 2007 to be a different church experience for the people of Jackson, Mississippi, a city with class and racial divisions. It was planted to be counter-cultural, to reach the marginalized, and those who desire to grow deeper in their Christian faith. The metro Jackson area is popularly known as the buckle of the Bible Belt, a place of entrenched cultural Christianity and segregated worship. This church was designed to be different: to raise a missional people for the city and the world as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The church's theme verse is John 10:16, where Jesus says, "And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock with One Shepherd."¹ The aim was to always go beyond our social comfort zones and connect everyone with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We do this because of Jesus' incarnate example. As he went to the broken, the lost, the forgotten, the overlooked, those in the shadows, so must we. Everyone can feel like "an other" at times in life. This church was started to present the gospel to build bridges and help everyone see they are made in the image of God and can receive His love and grace.

The complementary mission of the church was also to reach those desiring to grow deeper in their Christian faith. The teaching and preaching aimed to attract thinking Christians, individuals and families willing to wrestle with God's word and apply it radically to their lives. In response to this teaching, they would be led to go to neighbors and nations and break the mold of simplistic evangelism, often amounted to nothing more

¹ All Scripture quoted is from the English Standard Version Bible, unless otherwise noted.

than inviting someone to church. Ultimately however, even if the church's mission is counter-cultural, the surrounding culture can still reside deeply in the church.

Cultural patterns that stifle gospel teaching and living in Jackson include people already having a strong familiarity with the Church as an institution. Most have been raised in a church, attending Sunday school, church events, and youth retreats. People have a base knowledge of Christianity, even if it is not lived out or applied to life challenges. Many feel as they have already "been saved." Their foundation is secure from and because of their church background. To move people from their initial knowledge and history towards discipleship and an ability to compellingly articulate the gospel is a challenge.

Many who go to church here do so with specific expectations. Instead of discovering hope and new life in the gospel, hopes are misplaced. They desire a church to provide tools to give them a good life where they can be in prominent standing within this community. Church attendees expect their church of choice to benefit their professional status. Even more, church can become a means to the end of strong social networks. The social fabric of this culture is entwined with church, thus one's attendance, membership, and activity within it can revolve around social goals. It becomes highly possible for the cultivation of a solid relational network of friends to be more important for singles, couples, and families than the centrality of the gospel.

A certain style of communication is also expected and desired by people at church here. Many arrive looking for pragmatic help in areas of life such as finances, marriage, relationships, and other struggles. Instead of seeking to know and follow Jesus Christ, a church becomes one way to help them cultivate the life they want. Their church is simply

a viable way towards the most pleasurable life possible that carries an assurance of no hell in their future. Along with this, entertainment is the most important attribute sought after in preaching and the worship service. Congregants want messages to move their emotions with touches of humor throughout. This style of communication could be described as one filled with moving stories, laughter, and a flourish of self-help where they can leave feeling good about themselves as they exit for Sunday dinner.

An even bigger challenge within this culture is knowledge becomes primary, yet personal transformation is resisted because the pressures of class and status are strong. As people grow embedded in church, their relationships become superficial and functional instead of missional. Church can easily become a tool to use in building their own kingdom, one with a strong influence of the idolatry of family and materialism. The greater trends of American evangelicalism only exacerbate this challenge. For many in Jackson, it is easy to forget we are called to faithfully love our neighbors while knowing that no human society, even American society, can be identified with the Kingdom of God. Engaging people to profess and live as if their citizenship is in heaven means making churchgoers in Mississippi uncomfortable with segregated and self-centered church traditions.

How can the gospel be presented and made real in this environment? In a cultural context where Church and Bible knowledge is prevalent, yet personal and societal transformation is hindered by class and race, this project proposes preaching as a primary means of communicating the gospel to shape the lives of a congregation and help them articulate the gospel to themselves and others. Along with preaching, I believe this goal can be enhanced through the use of equipping classes, small groups, and further creative

means. Therefore, this paper proposes an overarching communication program for the people of Bellwether Church to see the gospel anew and live it out in their culture.

It begins with Sunday morning preaching, as the sermon is the rudder steering and guiding the ship. Preaching is primary because it allows the message to reach and connect with the greatest number of people. Many in this culture, and currently at Bellwether Church, do not attend small groups or equipping classes. They will come to Sunday morning worship, perhaps for the aforementioned reasons above. This then, is the one place where the gospel can be communicated and the congregation challenged to go deeper into discipleship and mission.

With preaching as a starting point, the communication plan moves members and attendees into arenas of equipping classes and small groups. These spaces are vital, because if the church is the means to the end of a strong social network, the emphasis on honesty, authenticity, and vulnerability with the gospel can only happen in smaller community. People can ask questions they may be ashamed to ask in a large group, delve into hot topics often avoided in a conformist culture, and receive critical feedback on how to close the gap between the gospel and Bible teaching or church patterns they have been raised with. In our church's history, we have seen smaller groups and classes to be catalysts for members to discover the gospel, consider it anew, and apply it to their lives. The plan then includes further creative forms of communication for the congregation. These are written devotions sent out to the church as a whole, small group study aides, and even occasional plays where people can see the gospel or biblical stories in a new light.

The first chapter addresses cultural challenges of the Bible Belt, particularly in Jackson. Many of these challenges reside around areas of class and race with Sunday remaining the most segregated day of the week. Differences in worship styles and traditions affect this segregation, yet this is no excuse for Christians to intentionally bridge racial divides by the power of the cross and presence of the Holy Spirit. Class can be argued to be a larger divide with many congregants desiring close connection to those in wealth or power. Church members will intentionally invite, welcome, and pursue doctors, politicians, financial planners, and private school families much more than they will single mothers, public school teachers, and city workers.

Bellwether Church is presented in this cultural context where racial and class tensions reside, yet are hidden beneath a veil of religion and performance. A portrait of the church's founding is given, along with my own pastoral background. It concludes with a picture of how the surrounding culture influences the church, yet also how the congregation has been impacted by the Holy Spirit and responded in counter-cultural ways to this community and the world beyond it.

The second chapter is a theological reflection of communication within a local church. It begins with a literature review on the subjects of preaching, apologetics, and discipleship. An established goal of this review is to help one see how communication within a church must lead to individual discipleship, spurring them to creative ways to connect with others in a community needing gospel transformation.

The next chapter is more specifically a theology of communication within a local church. This begins with preaching, yet moves into smaller group studies and individual mentoring. It also includes devotions and creative mediums for the congregation.

Combined together, the result should be apologetics and discipleship for those in the church.

The final part of the paper presents the strategic overarching communication program for Bellwether Church. The strategy includes both communication content and congregational goals. The starting point is a preaching plan for Sunday morning worship leading to smaller group studies and other mediums of written communication for the church as a whole. It then gives a timeline to implement this program. The paper concludes with means to assess the program's effectiveness within the church body.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

In many places across the world, when a pastor or church plants another church, they do so to reach those who do not know Christ. In the Bible Belt, there is a difference. Here, churches are often planted to reinforce cultural Christian norms. Churches begin here with visions and programs to help form more converts, yet discipleship patterns are generationally fixed. The good news of the gospel encourages social, racial, and political divides rather than unifying them into a diverse body of Christ.

Often, it can be more difficult to pastor a church in cities such as Dallas, Birmingham, or Jackson than in San Francisco, Seattle, or Boston. There, people are more questioning about their relationship to a church and Christianity. As a result, many are willing to ask hard questions of the Bible, of church traditions, of gospel witness, and whether they are Christian or attend churches or not. Here, it is not always evident where an individual stands with Jesus Christ. Rather than a clear dividing line of unregenerate and regenerate, not saved and saved, unbeliever and believer, everyone is inoculated with a version of the gospel of Jesus Christ that breeds a familiar apathy. One reason is people in Jackson have learned Bible verses growing up and can quote several such as John 3:16,

Philippians 4:13, and Romans 8:28 with ease. Many are raised with Bible stories as toddlers, having David and Goliath or Daniel in the lion's den read to them not only in church, but in their schools as well.

People attend church regularly, or at least say they do, even if it's only Christmas, Easter, and Mother's Day. It often seems as if nearly everyone has a church home, yet in many cases it is that of their parents or family. People do not believe they are born into sin; rather, they are born into their parents' faith. Many were baptized as infants, completed confirmation classes, and have a general familiarity with church to assume the role of a respectable, moral citizen.

What does one's Christianity or faith journey look like in this context? How does one believe they are faithfully living in Christ? It is a young couple or newlyweds trying to find a church because they believe it will be good for them. It is a parent wanting their child to be baptized at 4 or 5 years old because they are fearful if the child is not baptized they might go to hell. It is a 6th grader walking to the altar because his or her friends have first. It is confirmation class students are forced to attend and youth groups with peers as a way to combat moral anxiety parents feel from the new horizons of football games, driver's licenses, and private parties. It is one knowing the Bible yet not understanding it and going to the church where your friends go. The foundation of one's faith is a declining Protestant identity often built into segregated networks, which in Mississippi is deeply tied to a sorority and fraternity culture that protects privilege, upward mobility, and social acceptance through select groups with generational stamps of access. Mississippi is indeed a refuge for many wanting to escape the rapid transformation of cultural norms nationally. As the pressure of true gospel witness increases with the loss

of cultural power to Christians nationally, there is a reflex to tighten the grip on generational patterns of church tradition in Mississippi as a rebuff to change and dogged assertion that folk Christian traditions need not die. Ultimately however, John Perkins believes,

The next great awakening that I see coming is a renewal of what it means to be church. For this generation of young people, church isn't going to be a social club where you gather once or twice a week to recharge your personal faith. It's not going to be an institution that wields its power in society either. The world is tired of Christian plans to fix things. It is starving for the kind of authentic relationships that Christ makes possible as we're reconciled to one another in his body, the church.¹

Yet generational divisions of class are entrenched in Mississippi, with the Church and many traditions having prolonged and exacerbated these divides. In Southern cities such as Jackson, there is a deep divide between the cultural conservatism of the suburbs and rural areas with modern, diverse cities. In these rural areas and small towns, people are more traditional, less tolerant to secularism and change. An example is the resistance of many within rural Mississippi who oppose replacing the state Confederate flag.² Many rural communities also support recently passed statewide laws which allow people with religious objections to deny certain services to same-sex couples. In a city such as Jackson, attitudes and positions are more diverse. Nearly everyone supports changing the state flag and many feel current religious freedom laws are unjust, even those who consider themselves to be conservative, evangelical Christians. These attitudes are reflective of Jackson's increasing racial, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity.

¹ Charles Marsh and John Perkins, *Welcoming Justice: God's Movement Toward Beloved Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 89.

² Ralph W. Eubanks "Mississippi, The Two-Flag State," *The New Yorker* (April 2016), accessed October 16, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/mississippi-the-two-flag-state>.

Such differences impact how churches and pastors minister to congregants. Within any given church in Jackson, some congregants were born and raised in rural areas and migrated to Jackson for work. They bring their generational predispositions from their upbringing. Other congregants were raised within the city and acclimated to racial differences. They are often more urban, passionate about city gentrification, and extremely open to alternate ways of living.

Both these backgrounds come together with a diversity of expectations for churches in Jackson. Some are valid such as a church being able to provide healthy relationships and a stronger sense of learning what it means to live as a Christian. Yet many individuals place all their expectation of learning and growing upon their church itself and the primary teacher or preacher. They arrive to receive all their spiritual growth, at least for one day a week, and there is not an intentionality to attend regularly, play an active role, discover the Bible on their own, or weekly contribute to a smaller community of believers. Their focus is on what the church can provide in a given Sunday worship service. The nurturing of their faith begins and ends during this time.

There is an expectation for relationship, as they want to meet men and women who are also yearning, struggling, and working out their faith. Other relational desires are simply communal, as people desire friendships and don't want to be alone. However, when this desire becomes the main priority of seeking and finding a church, they place all their value on who is already in the church. Internal questions are posed even if they are not readily verbalized. Do the people of this congregation reflect my own values and desires? Would I go to dinner or socialize with this family or couple? Do they reflect my status, cultural, and political views? Making these answers their priority can easily create

a homogenous church, or even worse, cause other churches not to grow because many socially mobile people with needed resources all go to one particular church within their community and pour their resources into a church versus a city.

The same can be said for children or youth as many families attend or join a church with the best children or youth ministry. As they “church-hop,” parents take tours of the children’s wing or youth center. They see how much activity and resources are provided for their child. Their primary motive can be, “What can this church give to my family?” Meeting a family’s internal discipleship needs or upward mobility is much more paramount than a church’s mission to reach surrounding neighborhoods, particularly if that neighborhood is racially and economically diverse because this missional cost would dampen social mobility.

People here have an expectation for their church to help with business connections as people see value in forming relationships with church members to provide professional connections. If the church is large and prosperous, when one is a member it helps the person’s reputation and status within their profession. This is different than other areas of the country because in Jackson, the Church is still interwoven as the mainstay institution of the culture and it literally pays, economically and socially, to go to certain churches.

Further expectations are found in the preaching and teaching as people attend more to be entertained and receive self-help. There is a strong desire for moral-therapeutic deism: one seeks to hear what will help them lead a better life by their own

self-salvation works.³ They want teaching that makes them feel good, excited, and can provide a simple solution for their lives in the moment.

As Christians, we believe the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, this gospel can be challenging to hear when it includes a call to give up their life in order to fully gain it, or to turn from their present idols to the living Lord. In this context, such idols can easily be good things that become ultimate things, such as family, children, marriage, and career aspirations. Preaching the gospel message of salvation by grace and not works does not always sit well with those who work to do their best in appearance and always put their best foot forward. It can be even more difficult to preach the gospel of sanctification in putting sin to death, tithing as discipleship, forgiveness, and adding daily disciplines in a busy schedule of kids' activities, supper clubs, and a work pace that hinders one's relational and family life.

Teaching within churches is desired by many to be entertaining, with jokes and stories more important than wrestling with a biblical text. People will come and go from church to church based on how the sermons influence their emotions with prevailing preferences of that which captivates their imaginations and emotions rather than convicting their lives. How a sermon makes one feel is more important than how a sermon instructs or convicts. In fairness, many seek gospel centered preaching with a desire to be convicted yet there is a tendency to emphasize how one communicates the message over the content of the message. Some prefer passion and shouting, responding

³ Moral-Therapeutic Deism is a term used by many theologians, sociologists, writers, and ministers to give greater definition to a communication style focused on one doing what is right, addressing felt needs, and having a general belief in God.

that, “the preacher was fired up today,” even if the message was not the gospel or the speaking was against the culture rather than staying true to the Bible.

A positive trait of this culture, especially in Mississippi, is a love for stories. This love is seen in the large degree of writers, musicians, and artists who come from this state. A young boy or girl is raised in a tradition of stories told on front porches and around family circles. Thus, one can relate to the stories Jesus told in parables and to the great stories in the Old Testament. The challenge is to help people see the greater story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration within the Bible and that all good stories point back to this story. When this occurs, it can be life transforming. People then see with a new set of lenses or worldview. The challenge of preaching here is to encapsulate this metanarrative into sermons and teaching. Radical change occurs when Mississippians are able to depart from their self–enclosed bubble of gratification and moralism and see freedom and joy attainable outside themselves. This is a great goal and one to which this communication plan seeks to further.

The city of Jackson has many challenges contributing to the dynamics of ministry in its local churches. These challenges are connected in economic, racial, and class issues. Each one can be seen separately, yet all are interwoven with each other. Race and class affect a person’s economic mobility and potential. Economics contribute to maintaining the racial and class divisions. Each is addressed briefly within this section.

Economics

There is a great disparity between the rich and poor in Jackson. The wealthy are segregated in one small area in the city, known as “Northeast Jackson.” Over the past

several decades, there has been little desire to integrate other neighborhoods and a concentration in promoting a tight knit community of economics, political, and social power. As Jackson is the state capital, many of the state's most powerful economic and political players are affected by this generational trend and segregation with this close handed grip on resources costing the state to lag behind nationally. The wealthy in this area often decide to move to the suburbs or even to a college town within the state. Far too often, they simply state publicly the city of Jackson cannot be helped.

The economic life of the city manifests itself within the educational culture. There are two prominent private schools within the city, both having been formed out of segregation. Each is very expensive, keeping those who have economic mobility and the wealthy together, thereby creating a bubble for the students from Pre-K until graduation. In contrast, the public school system is poor and in disarray with all of Jackson's public schools recently receiving an "F" grading from the state's educational system except one, which received a "D" grade.

The economic situation has become cyclical and generational, creating a culture where those in the private school system are much more isolated from the problems of the city. These schools then become enclaves when the students graduate, go to college, and return, sending their children to the same private school which the majority of people within Jackson cannot afford. These others are trapped within a system that makes it difficult if not insurmountable to get out. Public school families have grown resentful of students and families within the private schools, as there are no creative partnerships and little bridge building between public and private schools.

The situation impacts churches in the Jackson as private school families and students want to go to church together. Public school students and families feel like “the other,” left out and underprivileged. It is a significant challenge within churches here for private school families to connect and grow meaningful relationships with those in the public school system. To make any headway, the challenge must be continually addressed.

Race

The divide is also played out in terms of race. The majority of public school families are black while most private school families are white. Within these white private school families, many struggle economically because all their resources go to their children’s education. This issue is indicative of racial challenges within the city. If a white family decides to live in Jackson, they almost always will seek to live in northeast Jackson. A simple justification for racism is the crime in Jackson. Instead of seeking justice and peace across racial divisions, the safety of a white family is prioritized to create wealthy pockets that purposefully disconnect from the structural and economic realities of racism in the city.

John Perkins is witness to the affects of this generational trend, “Our poor black communities cannot hide the effect that racism and oppression have had on us. We suffer from broken families, broken communities and a broken church. All you have to do to see this is come to my neighborhood in West Jackson, Mississippi. So many of our young black men have bought into this ‘jailhouse’ culture, and you can see them on the streets

with their pants hanging down and their underwear showing.”⁴ An attitude, even a culture, has grown in the African–American community where there is an expectation of time in jail or prison. More generally, there is an overarching anger stemming from generations of racism,

Our poor, young men don’t know why they’re angry. They just are. Kids in our neighborhood have lived such a segregated life that they don’t know any white people to be mad at. But they have internalized this rebellious anger, and it has turned into an unrecognized self-hatred. They kill the people they love most because they don’t know what to do with the fact that they’ve been taught to hate themselves. Meanwhile, the church does little to tell them who they really are. We haven’t taught them a language of affirmation.⁵

Instead, for many African–Americans in Jackson their, “identity got wrapped up in being black. The role of the black church was to speak out against oppression and get folks access to power. We didn’t offer our children a new identity, so the ones who could leave the community did and those who couldn’t leave got stuck in their anger and hopelessness.”⁶

Simple community service projects done by churches or neighborhood boards are gestures that require little personal or economic sacrifice but fulfill the moral impulse to “do good.” These churches can often work to grow global mission programs and raise financial support for overseas missions, yet are wary to work to partner with local churches of a different race. Perkins concludes,

Another thing I just don’t understand is why the same white churches who think they are too culturally different to do anything in my black community send mission teams to Africa? Is the cultural barrier easier to cross on an airplane?

⁴ Marsh and Perkins, *Welcoming Justice: God’s Movement Toward Beloved Community*, 38.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶ *Ibid.*

We've let this world define us to the point that we don't trust God to transform us and make community possible across racial and economic lines. It's easy to give out of abundance and help the poor Africans "over there." But white Christians hesitate to cross the tracks in their hometown and meet their brothers and sisters on the other side.⁷

The city remains very segregated and this segregation continues to impact churches in the city as they are challenged with reaching out and connecting with people and families of a different race.

Class

The issue of race even more starkly manifests itself in class however, and is a barrier throughout Mississippi. There is a saying, "Mississippi is a club, not a state," and much truth resides in that statement. Because it is a small state with deep divides between the rich and poor, black and white, one is always dealing with the issue of class, and Jackson is a microcosm of this challenge.

There are those who were born and raised in Jackson, whose families lived here for generations, many of whom have wealth and the majority of whom are white. This group would be the highest class. There are those newer to Jackson, who have lived here for one generation and have some wealth and influence, yet even these people are not allowed into the higher strata of old families with generational ties and legacies. There is a large African-American population, who live under the legacy of racism and unequal opportunity. There is a white working class, who live in both Jackson and outside the city, who are descendants of the sharecroppers. They would be regarded as "rednecks." Navigating class differences requires a nuanced approach to veiled racism, economic

⁷ Ibid., 42.

snobbery, and real material shortfalls in terms of job opportunity and industry growth in one of the poorest states nationally. Having these different class groups come together as a church body is an enduring challenge.

Communication Assumptions in Jackson Churches

To synthesize these disparate elements, a uniting force for people to attend and join churches is the preaching style of a particular preacher. In a city with many divisions, the touchstone figure of a preacher who reaches the masses still configures into the Christian imagination, however far from reality in Jackson, of a united church. A congregant's faith may begin and end with the weekly sermon or the preacher who preaches to them over the course of several years. Preaching and the preachers who communicate become most important for many.

Preaching is one of the most effective tools in communicating the gospel to an individual church. However, many preachers do not take the time or care needed to develop and communicate the content of passages they preach. Instead, their primary concern is to entertain their hearers or move them with emotional stories in order to fill the pews with the masses instead of the power and glory of the gospel. Often the ideal of a unified church falls short because many preachers fall prey to a selfish ambition of a large church instead of a unified church. Paul David Tripp writes,

I wondered how many (pastors) throw something together at the last minute and how many sermons are not given the time necessary to communicate what needs to be communicated. I wondered how many congregations around the world are, plainly and simply, being poorly fed by unprepared pastors. I wondered how many sermons end up being boring restatements of favorite commentaries or little more than impersonal, poorly delivered theological lectures.⁸

⁸ Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling* (Wheaton, IL, Crossway, 2012), 137.

Preaching must be given time, thought, and prayer from the moment the preacher is first moved by the message he will later communicate. Often, preaching is relegated to what will move the hearer to simply like the speaker or get them to return to the church.

Tripp continues,

Preaching is not just a craft of content; it is also a craft of communication. You must meditate, pray, labor, wrestle, and work on how to communicate the truths that you have come to understand to the particular people who are in your care. I am persuaded that we have devalued the communication aspect of powerful, effective, life-changing gospel preaching. I am not talking about your trying to be a John Piper or Tim Keller. No, I'm talking about your commitment to do everything you can to winsomely and cogently explain and apply the glorious truths that you exegeted as you undertook the necessary discipline of content.⁹

Preaching can be the most powerful tool of communication God uses, yet pastors can often trade the spiritual discipline of preparation for the congregations' affection or the desire for a large following instead of a unified, diverse following. Many simply desire to please their flock before pleasing God.

The desired style of preaching in this context is relatable, practical, and helps the person as they face life challenges. They desire messages to help them practically in their parenting, marriage, financial management, dealing with enemies, and fears. This desire is right as the Bible and the gospel give answers to these needs, yet they seek a message that can be received as practical and palatable rather than life transforming. They enjoy when a preacher tells personal stories, how they stumble and overcome their own problems, whether past or present. They desire a strong sense of personal connection to the preacher as someone with whom they can relate.

⁹ Ibid., 148.

Many believe they already know the penetrating truths of the gospel, even if it has not penetrated fully into their life. They know the cross, the empty tomb, the Holy Spirit, and Sunday school stories from Moses to David to Jonah. Thus, a primary task in this context is to awaken people to what they believe they already know.

Gospel transformation, however, cannot happen in the context of human-centered preaching. In such communication, if the person receives the tools needed, they can help and even save themselves. Much of this preaching is pragmatic, with the listeners as its starting point and the trajectory leading them to make a decision to give their lives to Christ. Such communication content with stylistic flourishes is rampant in the whole state of Mississippi as it begins and ends with what God can do for you. God is the servant to you rather than you as the servant of the Lord. There is also an overarching sense of choice embedded here. One can always choose: your salvation, to be good, and to forgive. In this sense, it's all up to you. It simply depends if you make the right choice. This style of preaching, at its worst, is self-help with a few Bible verses thrown in, not too different from a TED talk. There is not an emphasis on the glory of God, the stain of sin in every heart, how we can't accomplish anything on our own, and a power beyond us for our personal lives and the world.

Another preaching tradition in the context of Jackson is expository, which focuses its efforts around preaching through books of the Bible. Such sermons often focus completely on Scripture, often taking large passages and going through them verse by verse. These preachers will often take an entire book of the Bible and preach through it for a year or more.

However, this focus can easily be more on knowledge than on personal transformation. Here, personal stories and relating with the congregation is frowned upon. The goal is to stay squarely with the Bible and many find this preaching style dry and not relatable. They attend yet find it difficult to connect. Those who do call such churches home here are or can easily become self-righteous in their own knowledge and being right about all aspects of their theology. They can have a lack of mission to the city and the world when the focus is on correct teaching rather than connecting it to people today.

An overarching question is whether these traditions can be blended and fused in this context. Can the gospel be communicated through preaching of the Bible and connect hearers to the Holy Spirit to transform them as disciples for their neighbors, city, and the world? Of course, this is possible and has occurred throughout history by preachers who worked hard to craft their preaching. A primary argument of this paper is that preaching and teaching is the primary way to produce gospel centered lives, even above efforts towards social justice, community service, house churches or small groups. The gospel always attracts and offends, so the model of a large flock and celebrity pastor is not the gold standard as this breeds a man centered gospel, self-satisfied moralism, and prolongs racial and economic divides that Jesus Christ came to abolish. Instead, the goal is life transformation, where people awaken to what they know, taste or see the power and beauty of the gospel, and live it out in the joys and suffering of life. To this end, Bellwether Church is being led.

Bellwether Church's History & Ministry Context

Even in a city with many churches, there was a need for more churches with a heart for missions and heralding the centrality of the gospel. In Jackson, too many churches were and remain inwardly focused: this has produced people who entertained with the goal of a mega-church or people with a degree of biblical knowledge, yet not on mission for Jesus. Bellwether Church was planted to fill this need for more gospel-centered churches with a prevailing heart of missions to the city and the world.

Bellwether Church was planted in 2007. It was founded on the principles of both evangelism and discipleship. For evangelism, its mission was based on John 10:16, as previously stated. Jesus always goes after others not of the fold in this verse; if we are to follow him, so should we. Discipleship was initially based on the idea of raising leaders. We took the passage of Jesus talking to Peter in John 21 and used it to show Jesus' call to grow as a leader and lead others to him. This passage is John 21:15-19 and it states,

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "yes, Lord; you know that I love You." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He said to him, "yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" and he said to Him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." (This He said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this He said to him, "Follow Me."

Here, Jesus calls Peter to follow him and to feed his sheep. Bellwether Church's name is derived from the original meaning of the word bellwether, the lead sheep of the flock. Therefore, its mission was to raise leaders of the flock who would follow Christ, our

Shepherd. It tied directly to John 10:16 as Jesus goes to others who would hear his voice and there would be one flock with one shepherd. The desired goal has always been to disciple people so they would go to others for Christ. The message was that a leader for Christ has a heart for others and is always going to them. Thus, mission and discipleship were always explicitly tied together.

Within many Jackson churches, congregations did not have or had lost a desire for gospel transformation. Many churches in the city are rooted in traditions, which while being good, become difficult to surmount when confronted with the challenge of connecting with new and different people. Thus, many churches become simply too inwardly focused. Upon planting Bellwether Church, my wife and I had been able to become embedded in the Jackson community and form deep relationships. We had gotten to know the city of Jackson. Our initial commitment and focus was to plant a church vastly different from churches within the city.

In its founding, there was a desire for people to have a different church experience at Bellwether, motivated by evangelism and discipleship where the gospel was not just the “A-B-C” but the “A-to-Z” of the Christian life. The gospel was to be presented not only as the way to enter the Kingdom, but also as the way to address every problem and grow at every step. Instead of finding worth and meaning in performance that leads to pride and disdain for others, or discouragement and self-loathing if we fail at our goals. The gospel would create a new self-image.

With my past travel, living abroad, and educational experiences, God had cultivated my heart with an abiding passion for those who questioned or rejected Christianity. I also connected with those who felt they could maintain and develop a

Christian faith outside and apart from a local church. I had personally lived this experience, seeing Church as a relic, not longer useful in personal development and spiritual transformation. There remain many who believe they can read the Bible, have devotion time, and pray without a church. Even more, they are able to form substantive relationships outside a church where they show love to others and received it as well. These individuals believe the Church cannot accomplish its stated biblical mission with an overarching culture of inwardness. These individuals and families are rampant throughout the western world and it is a consistent challenge in the Protestant tradition.

Planting Bellwether Church, its original core team wanted its ultimate focus to be outward and Kingdom oriented, to reach, connect, and send people into the world, using the gifts we possessed to grow in people a new love for local churches. God opened doors for this church to be planted in the city where we had been placed. The backgrounds and experiences of this core team shaped the church's founding and its culture. The church community met resistance quickly, as our gospel focus differed greatly from the surrounding culture and even some of the people who had become part of this new church.

As previously stated, the church is a bridge to social relationships for many in the South. It's an entry point to a new set of friends or the social circle one wants to be associated with. In planting Bellwether Church, we underestimated this cultural idol that impacts the social, economic, and political power dynamics in the entire state. Our new church had a small group of people who were Kingdom minded, wanting to be part of a church whose mission was to reach others, but also desiring new friendships and deeper

relationships. Most were nominally connected to a church and did not have leadership positions within their church. At Bellwether Church, they could more easily acquire both.

Churches in this context are used by many of their attendees to form social networks. Within our church, we saw our Kingdom-minded leaders' desire to reach new and different people subside once they had reached an acknowledged position of power as a deacon, elder, or lay-leader. The members, satisfied and content by internal relationships, easily become complacent. This is a common struggle faced by pastors in the area.

Another element underestimated at Bellwether Church was the pride a congregation feels around the number of people who attend and the building itself. Numbers are emphasized everywhere and in everything in Southern culture. The questions consistently asked are, "how many people go to your church?; how many members does the church have?; or was it a good crowd this Sunday?" For too many, this is the sole indicator of success in a local church. This constant pressure of size and numbers becomes the defining question in all planning. Early in this church's life, high attendance Sundays brought excitement while low Sundays triggered a depressed attitude among congregants, at least for the rest of the day. When numbers do not continue to rise, plateau, or even drop, members and outsiders see it as indicator of the church as a whole. Some people leave; others question the leadership and communication style of the preacher. Ultimately in this context, this barrier must be faced by church leaders and it becomes a matter of choosing to proclaim the gospel with the unique gifts God has given them or continually basing their efforts to see the desired results of a consumer oriented culture.

In addition to this spiritual battle, there is the pride of a church's building or facilities that must be overcome. For several years, Bellwether Church set-up and took down its Sunday worship services in portable locations. The church worshipped in different places, from a workout gym, to a museum auditorium, to a school performing arts center. The tiresome duties of ongoing set-up soon created a driving goal to find a church home, a permanent building.

God ultimately provided this church with a permanent place, a tremendous blessing to be connected to a local neighborhood, yet more people became committed to a building than to a body. To combat the building becoming the church's identity, the leadership kept the focus on missions to both neighbors and nations. The building was intentionally defined as a gift the people of the church were called to steward.

To buttress the cultural trend of making the relationships within the church and even the building itself more important than pursuing Jesus in all relationships, Bellwether Church built a vibrant global missions program for a small Southern church. The church's first global mission was in Honduras. The church has partnered with a local Honduran ministry to build homes, schools, and churches, while doctors provided needed medical care, and pastors trained and equipped other Honduran pastors.

Another global mission has been to India. This mission has been more recent with smaller teams being sent. Bellwether Church has been able to fully support up to four church planters around the city of Kolkata as well as minister to victims of sex trafficking in after care shelters. The church also helped to start a school for slum children in Hyderabad.

Finally, the church is now involved in further supporting church planters in United Arab Emirates and in Italy. Global ministry is a harbinger for activating Bellwether members into seeing how big God's kingdom is and the dark places God calls us to globally and to bring that same clarity back locally. Such global ministry connects the church to the global body of Christ, an invaluable lesson to the parochial, folk culture of religion in the South. It also inspires church members to go to the others at the ends of the earth, including across the racial divides in their local context.

Bellwether Church has steadily connected to the marginalized throughout its history because of its mission, focused and connected around the verse, John 10:16. As this church emphasizes Jesus going out to others who will hear his voice, the church has harnessed the call, enabling the church body to attract those who feel like they are an "other" in the local culture. This includes many who have struggled with divorce, addictions, depression, and financial loss. Many of these people have often been of a different race or social class. All of this led to several relational and social issues within the church as different groups quickly formed. Combatting the tendency to form groups around shared social relationships or status can be challenging in pastoral ministry and can even lead to conflict within the church where the pressure to live a perfect moral life can leave many to feel excluded. However, many who have felt left out in other churches did come to feel at home in Bellwether Church.

In this present context of the Bible Belt, it is vital for churches to be intentional to connect to the marginalized outside the church and to make efforts to connect them into the fabric of the community within the church. This forces one to continually move past their own attitudes and prejudices to see all human beings as made in the image of God

and worthy of God’s love as well as our own. As an African–American leader and prophetic voice, Frederick Douglass offers an example as a Christian and prophet in a racially divided society who saw one of the primary witnesses of the Church to offer, “A constructive vision of how to live as a faithful Christian in slaveholding America. Douglass cared little for quibbles over arcane theology and more for putting the Christian faith into practice. To live like Christ, he believed, was to care for the outcast and marginalized and oppressed—the orphan, widow, and slave.”¹⁰

This attribute is vital for a church as, “Congregations must be places of healing for persons marginalized in society. This was central to the relational ministry of Jesus and the culture of first–century churches, and is nonnegotiable. People feel marginalized in society today because of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and the like. Do they experience local congregations as an oasis of healing?”¹¹ Growing this culture is not only important for those who feel marginalized, but is also healthy for those who do not. In this context, “People with privilege and power need congregations where they can exchange places (reconcile) with people who have been marginalized. They must experience the healing possibilities of real relationships and status inversion.”¹²

Bellwether Church has not only offered connection and relationships with the marginalized, the African–American community, and those who feel like they are part of a lower social class, but it has provided leadership opportunities as well. These leadership

¹⁰ D.H. Dilbeck, *Frederick Douglass: America’s Prophet* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 85.

¹¹ Allan Aubrey Boesak, and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 87.

¹² *Ibid.*

opportunities have allowed a diversity of people to serve as deacons, small group leaders, and short-term mission trip leaders. The church has also sought to give significant leadership to women in the church as staff, small group leaders, and deacons. This is reflective of the biblical model of church leadership in the first-century where, “The early church placed women into positions of leadership challenging sexism and further pressing the meaning of reconciliation. Many of these women leaders were doubly oppressed as colonized subjects and as women.”¹³ The female leadership within Bellwether Church has been fruitful for the entire church body as it witnesses women providing much wisdom, leadership, and service through their God-given gifts.

The church’s focus on attempting to be biblically faithful while being also applying this teaching to address cultural issues has attracted several who desire to learn more about the Bible and grow further in their understanding of Scripture. Because a majority of churches are solely focused on keeping numbers and budgets high, many pastors and leaders do not always challenge their congregants nor address difficult issues of suffering or self-sacrifice. Yet success has been found in crossing racial and social barriers by expository preaching that does not shy away from tough theological or pastoral questions. Ironically, the emphasis away from pragmatic folk religion that tends to grow large yet socially, economically, and racially homogenous churches has allowed this church to grow a diverse congregation.

With this combination of attracting the marginalized and gospel-centered communication, the church has been blessed by seeing new conversions. Over the past several years, Bellwether has celebrated baptisms of believers of all backgrounds. These

¹³ Ibid., 84.

are people who have not known Christ or merely thought they were Christians, yet ready to begin a new walk experienced only in the gospel. This is a great encouragement to keep moving forward in the current direction.

The gospel states one's root sin is not just failing in obedience to God, but relying on one's obedience for salvation (2 Cor. 5:21 and Col. 1: 22-23). Growing Bellwether Church in this context means the gospel has to be the third way, neither high minded homogeneous moralism nor irreligion or de-churched attempts to live outside the local church. If moralism says, "I am doing the right things that God commands," this further entrenches the segregated, prideful, Southern church culture. If irreligion says, "I decide what is right and wrong for myself," then it rejects Jesus as savior, even if he is revered as helper and example. Both strategies are self-salvation and contribute to the man centered Christian culture in the Bible Belt as opposed to God centered.

This paper argues that gospel preaching, a communication centered on Jesus Christ being the actor and author of our salvation, is the springboard to dynamically change this entrenched, complacent church culture. Typical growth strategies of local missions, small group ministry, and even global outreach cannot be sustained in a transformative trajectory without gospel centered preaching infusing every aspect of church culture. The key component of this communication plan in this Southern culture is not to treat evangelism as simply one department of ministry, but for evangelism to permeate everything we do. The fruitfulness of global missions in this context has shown that communicating the gospel as something we do before the nations and expect to be overheard by many friends who don't believe or don't know what they believe catapults the church from complacency to missional, theological clarity.

With this gospel centered communication plan, Bellwether Church seeks to equip and motivate every member into an evangelistic lifestyle. This lifestyle will be complemented with authentic community to grow disciples: a truth telling community that is free to repent, an accepting community that reflects the grace given by Christ, a holy community that urges others to lead God-pleasing lives, a sacrificially generous community, and a suffering community that loves and forgives others. The catalyst for this synthesis of evangelism and discipleship begins with gospel centered preaching that always remembers the grace miracle of one's faith and always treats non-believers with respect. Only by permeating all aspects of preaching with those who are not of the fold (John 10:16) in mind can the church be transformed to a missional community as Jesus modeled.

PART TWO
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is gospel centered communication and how can it be communicated? To develop a communication plan for a local church, centered on gospel preaching, supplemented by equipping classes and small groups, and leading to individuals transformed by discipleship for evangelism and apologetics demands a thorough review of literature in gospel communication. This section gives an overview of literature on the theology of preaching, apologetics, and discipleship in light of developing and implementing this communication plan for the congregation of Bellwether Church.

Several authors have been chosen in the areas of preaching, apologetics, and discipleship. The authors were selected because of their extensive study and writing in each of these areas. For preaching itself, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Charles Spurgeon, and Tim Keller were chosen because of their convictions about biblical preaching, centered in the gospel of salvation through faith in the work of Jesus Christ alone, and their desire to help the communication of this witness through the preaching within churches. In the area of apologetics, Os Guinness was chosen because of his writing of the need for apologetics in Christian believers' gospel communication. Joseph Loconte was selected

because of his use of creative stories to enhance apologetics. Lesslie Newbigin was chosen because of his belief in the need for Christians to witness to the truth of their faith in the world in which they live. For the area of discipleship, Dallas Willard was selected because of his belief that discipleship itself had been lost in much Christian ministry and within churches. Tim Keller was chosen again in this area because of his work to incorporate discipleship in all levels of church life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was chosen because of his work to define the costs of discipleship and emphasizing that Christians should embrace such costs because of their love for Jesus and their faith in his work in their lives and in the world.

Theology of Preaching

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones had much to say and write about preaching. His book, *Preaching and Preachers* can be essential for every preacher as it encourages and inspires communicators and preachers to take hold of the gospel in their sermons and boldly proclaim it clearly to their congregations that all may understand. Its continual theme stresses the need on clear, simple, consistent communication of the gospel by the preachers. To this end he quotes Martin Luther,

“When I preach I regard neither doctors nor magistrates, of whom I have above forty in the congregation. I have all my eyes on the servant maids and the children. And if the learned men are not well pleased with what they hear, well, the door is open.” That, surely, is the right attitude. Some “doctors and magistrates” perhaps may feel like that, that not sufficient attention is being paid to them by the preacher in the pulpit. But the wise preacher keeps his eye on the servant maids and the children.¹

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 140.

Preaching and preachers should be easy for all to understand. The preacher's dedication should be on making the gospel plain and easy to follow across racial, socio-economic, and cultural groups.

This is a challenge posed in preaching today: the gospel is essentially different from prosaic matters commonplace, yet many preachers do not delve into the remarkable miracle of the gospel while simultaneously using native, contextualized language. Addressing this challenge, "The answer to the argument that people in this post-Christian age do not understand terms like Justification, Sanctification and Glorification is simply to ask another question. When did people understand them? When did the unbeliever understand this language? The answer is: Never! These terms are peculiar and special to the gospel."² The preacher is to help others see what is being preached is not ordinary and dull, but unique, special, and powerful. It is part of the call of the preacher to teach others the meaning of these biblical doctrines in clear, understandable language. What we preach is often not fully understood by the hearers, because it goes against much of their rational thought. This should be no excuse, however, as good communication in preaching should contribute to the hearer's understanding of the special salvation outside our rational thinking.

In addition, Lloyd-Jones stresses the preacher's interior soul should also be reflective of an otherworldly contrast. There should be no distinction or contrast between the message the preacher preaches and the life he lives. Complete integrity between the life of preacher and his words is necessary,

² Ibid., 142.

Our Lord attracted sinners because He was different. They drew near to Him because they felt that there was something different about Him. That poor sinful woman of whom we read in Luke 7 did not draw near to the Pharisees and wash their feet with her tears, and wipe them with the hair of her head. No, but she sensed something in our Lord—His purity, His holiness, His love—and so she drew near to Him. It was His essential difference that attracted her. And the world always expects us to be different. This idea that you are going to win people to the Christian faith by showing them that after all you are remarkably like them, is theologically and psychologically a profound blunder.³

Christians often either make a wholesale retreat from culture or create a Christian subculture that mimics mainstream values and trends. To call people to theological reflection and revival requires a diagnosis of the spiritual health of the preacher. To draw people to the uniqueness of the gospel means the preacher himself should be living a unique life: praying and reaching out to unbelievers each week, genuinely engaged with his reading of the Word and not perfunctory, pursuing spiritual goals with a cross crucified heart, and asking for accountability leading towards repentance in his recognized weak areas. For a preacher to be too relatable is both overrated and ultimately not effective communication.

The book also emphasizes that preaching should never trade truth for entertainment. It can be possible for a church and its leaders to experience the temptation to build a fast-growing congregation, sending many preachers down a road of psychologically uplifting sermons with more pop-culture references than theology of justification, sanctification, and glorification. Communication easily becomes speaking and performing which, while it may be good, it is not preaching as, “Furthermore, light entertainment, easy familiarity and jocularities are not compatible with a realization of the

³ Ibid., 150.

seriousness of the condition of the souls of all men by nature, the fact that they are lost and in danger of eternal perdition, and their consequent need of salvation. Not only that, such methods cannot bring out the Truth; and our business is to preach the Truth.”⁴

Entertainment highlights the comforts of familiarity, what pleases my heart and mind must automatically correlate with what is most needed for my soul. On the contrary, gospel centered preaching collapses the normal categories of goodness, moralism, and success into foreign upside categories of sin, sacrifice, and a cross-centered life. The best life possible or an adjustment in one’s thinking do not necessitate a death, the most important death, which is the love of self.

Knowledge of and an ultimate practice of repentance is the first step of gospel-centered communication. Avoiding the bedrock of repentance for an average Christian listener or non-believer minimizes the power of the gospel. Not only do religious moralists in congregation walk away a little more prideful at their efforts in performing more like Christ in their “decisions,” but non-believers, especially secular non-believers, are not captivated by a transformative message that is offensive: you are far worse off than you ever dreamed, but radical in that you are far more loved than you dare to imagine. Proclaiming and portraying this, “is the primary task of the Church, the primary task of the leaders of the Church, the people who are set in this position of authority; and we must not allow anything to deflect us from this, however good the cause, however great the need.”⁵ This is the foundation of preaching throughout Church history as, “What is it that always heralds the dawn of a Reformation or of a Revival? It is renewed

⁴ Ibid., 151.

⁵ Ibid., 30.

preaching. Not only a new interest in preaching but a new kind of preaching. A revival of true preaching has always heralded these great movements in the history of the Church.”⁶

This new kind of preaching, a revival through preaching, requires inviting both the believer and skeptics to the pulpit in a way that ministers to them both. Tim Keller is a model of effective preaching to believers and skeptics in our current context. His book, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*, offers examples from Scripture that are highly relevant for our present culture. His book opens by stating good preaching truly begins only with the power of the Holy Spirit, not only in the communication of the preacher, but in the hearts of the listeners as well, “The difference between good preaching and great preaching lies mainly in the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the listener as well as the preacher. The message in Philippi came from Paul, but the effect of the sermon on hearts came from the Spirit. This means God can use an indifferently crafted message as great preaching.”⁷ For communication to be effective, all the preparation should begin with a reliance upon and prayer for the Holy Spirit to move and act in sermons. If this reliance is absent, the key element of revival and renewal jettisons past the ears, hearts, and souls of the listeners.

Keller states two areas where the preacher must focus: the Word and the hearer, “In the end, preaching has two basic objects in view: the Word and the human listener. It is not enough to just harvest the wheat; it must be prepared in some edible form or it can’t nourish and delight. Sound preaching arises out of two loves—love for the Word of God

⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁷ Tim Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 11.

and love of people—and from them both a desire to show people God’s glorious grace.”⁸

When we love something or someone, we are open to the grace of God flowing freely. Good preaching is not only open to the Bible but also open to the true spiritual standpoint of the people whom we preach to. Grace, the same love and openness God shows to us, is evident when we preach Christ in all communication. Preachers must think and work to consider how best the people of the congregation will hear the truth. This art is most possible when the sermon is gospel centered on Jesus Christ. One cannot connect with the affections of the heart unless they are pointed to the beauty of Jesus, showing how the truth of the particular Scripture being preached can be lived out by faith in the work of Christ.⁹

Becoming like Jesus in the beauty and glory of his humanity is the goal of Christ-centered preaching. A challenge to this goal is the desire for the humanity of Christ to match our unrepentant hearts, so then the preacher may respond when the push of congregants is to give relatable sermons. In this vein, the hidden or silent prejudices of the culture never get tackled or addressed. A veneer of moralism, prevalent in this church’s context, continues unabated because Jesus’ beauty and glory are reduced to simple life decisions, practical marriage steps, or child rearing techniques. To restructure the affections of the heart is a call to herald the power of Christ to completely redeem the heart. Without remaining resolutely focused on the crucified Christ, the church body regresses into a Christian subculture ghetto, full of terms and practices that promote a glorified “Christian” who is strong only in their ability to promote their favorite idols

⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁹ Ibid., 21-22.

without obvious moral failure. To mimic the incarnate Jesus requires the preacher to preach with an undivided heart before God, to point every text to fulfillment of the person of Christ. Without that sharp focus, other idols quickly crowd out the beauty and glory of Christ.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon offers superb preaching instruction and inspiration with his *Lectures to My Students*. In it, he provides an overarching theology of preaching for students, relevant then and now. Spurgeon emphasizes the need for sound theology in preaching, and not the temptation for rhetorical flourishes to mask a gospel deficient sermon, “You may be fine rhetoricians, and be rich in polished sentences, but without knowledge of the gospel, and aptness to teach it, you are but a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. Verbiage is too often the fig leaf which does the duty as a covering for theological ignorance.”¹⁰

Spurgeon’s book of lectures continually emphasizes the point of keeping one’s communication simple and focused on the main thing, or rather, the main person, Jesus Christ, “Hence I urge you to keep to old-fashioned gospel, and to that only, for assuredly it is the power of God unto salvation. Of all I would wish to say this is the sum; my brethren, preach CHRIST, always and evermore. He is the whole gospel. His person, offices, and work must be our one great, all-comprehending theme. The world needs still to be told of its Savior, and of the way to reach Him.”¹¹

¹⁰ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 75.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

In the proclamation of preaching, “We are not called to proclaim philosophy and metaphysics, but the simple gospel.”¹² The cross of Christ is to supersede all human philosophy, even the pursuit of theology and doctrine that sometimes sidelines the cross as an historical fact and not the universal burden of all Christians as Spurgeon so eloquently states. To protect the primacy of the doctrine of grace means all theology found in the church body, from evangelism, small groups, children and youth ministry, local and global missions, must be shaped by the cross of Christ first and foremost. To break racial barriers or overcome inferiority, melt away self-hatred or self-inflation, the balm of the cross of Christ changes everything. The temptation to allow social justice theories, secular or vernacular, or pop psychology terms to creep into preaching and teaching diminishes the transformative power of the cross and the doctrines of grace. One must be jealous to guard the gospel of grace from learning that will divert others from the true mission of preaching salvation and sanctification through the cross of Christ alone. To provide a bridge to non-believers, the gospel must be presented in a wholly new way, not the familiar tropes of popular culture, but a teaching that revives believers to the amazement of grace regularly and overwhelms the non-believer with the sheer audacity of such a gospel.

John Stott wrote *Between Two Worlds: the Challenge of Preaching Today* to challenge preachers to remember the heralding power and privilege of the spoken word of God heralded out. As preachers, we now live between two worlds where, “In a world which seems either unwilling or unable to listen, how can we be persuaded to go on

¹² Ibid., 83.

preaching, and learn to do so effectively? The essential secret is not mastering certain techniques but being mastered by certain convictions. In other words, theology is more important than methodology.”¹³ This is so true, yet seemingly so unheeded in the present. The starting point of communication should be theological convictions based on the power and profundity of the cross of Christ and not methodology.

To carry forth this charge, Stott tells preachers to keep in mind the combination of word and action in preaching from the Bible. We are to use both the words and actions, or stories, from Scripture,

Further, we need to keep together in our preaching the saving acts and the written words of God. Some preachers love to speak about the ‘mighty acts’ of God, and really seem to believe in them, yet what they say tends to be their own interpretation of them, rather than what God has said about them in Scripture. Other preachers are entirely faithful in their exposition of God’s Word, yet remain dull and academic because they have forgotten that the heart of the Bible is not what God has said, but what He has done for our salvation through Jesus Christ.¹⁴

The gospel is to promote an entirely new self–image, that we are saved by sheer grace. This enlivens the preacher to be heralds of the mighty acts of God without needing to veer from a faithful exposition of God’s word. To lose the excitement of the preciousness of grace is to fall into the trap Spurgeon warned of, to not preach Christ as the one, great all–encompassing theme in all of Scripture. The excitement to which preachers can fall prey is to syncretize cultural trends, most especially youth celebrity culture, into the main teaching of the church, and instead of increasing the name of Christ congregants are enamored with the celebrity of the communicator and not the remarkable purveyor of

¹³ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company), 1994, 92.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

grace, Jesus himself. These techniques are immersed in other areas of ministry to create a diluted cascade of teachings that are either devoid of worship with a dry exposition of the Word or filled with manufactured excitement in worshipping the mighty acts of men or women in the congregation where the Lord serves their choice idols instead of them serving the Lord in costly grace.

Stott goes on to state preaching must emphasize the victorious, redemptive work of Christ we see in the Word of God and should hear in preaching by referring one to the historical insight that,

Perhaps no contemporary author has expressed this belief in the power of the Word more eloquently than Gustaf Wingren, the Swedish Lutheran professor of Theology in the University of Lund, in his book *The Living Word*. The theme of the whole Bible, he argues, is conflict, the duel between God and Satan, and it is the gospel which sets people free. Between Christ's victory and the consummation, "lies an empty space of waiting. It is in this gap, this empty space, that preaching sends forth its voice." Again, "the time between Easter and the Parousia is the time for preaching." Preaching supplies the living Christ with both feet and a mouth.¹⁵

The redemptive work of Christ heard through preaching is what is most needed in the empty space stated by Stott. Such proclamation provides the opportunity for Jesus Christ to come and make himself known to the entire congregation of a church. Therefore, preaching is also to show that the context for a gospel-centered life is never merely individual. The preaching of the gospel can create a unique community to exist in this gap, and the office of preaching can unite the congregants into a holy, accepting, truth telling community whose overall purpose is to advance the Kingdom of God by spreading the gospel.

¹⁵ Ibid., 107-108.

Finally, Stott expresses concern about the state of preachers, their goals, and how the culture views them. He feels preachers have lost the sense of preaching's primacy within the Church and instead traded this focus on other church tasks. This has partly occurred because congregations and the culture itself view the preacher's role differently. They now easily see him not as the teacher, theologian, and preacher, but as the leader, administrator, and organizer of the local church,

If today's pastors were to take seriously the New Testament emphasis on the priority of preaching and teaching, not only would they find it extremely fulfilling themselves, but also it would undoubtedly have a very wholesome effect on the Church. Instead, tragic to relate, many are essentially administrators, whose symbols of ministry are the office rather than the study, and the telephone rather than the Bible.¹⁶

Deliberate effort and concentrated time is thereby required to fulfill the heralding call of preaching for a congregation. A healthy church is defined by good and effective communication in preaching and teaching to its people. This necessitates the discipline of time and focus on this task and it is to be viewed as the most important work of a pastor.

This is a brief survey of literature on a theology of preaching. It must also include a review of what effective gospel preaching can achieve, particularly in a local church in a certain context. If given time, energy, prayer, and reliance on the Holy Spirit, preaching can achieve both apologetics for evangelism and discipleship for sanctification. This review will now include these aspects of apologetics and discipleship in communication and in the life a local church.

¹⁶ Ibid.,124-125.

Apologetics

Apologetics is making a defense for the Gospel. As such, preaching must take this role into itself with unflinching faithfulness. Today in churches of western culture, much preaching needs a large degree of apologetics, as many congregants can remain silently skeptical while others have been steadily indoctrinated to a comfortable consumer Christianity. Preachers and pastors can learn from Os Guinness, who wrote *Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion*, to implement apologetics in their preaching and interpersonal communication. The goal of this book is what Guinness believes is the great challenge of our time, "How can we speak for our Lord in a manner that does justice to the wonder of who God is, to the profundity of the good news He has entrusted to us, to the wily stubbornness of the human heart and mind, as well as to the wide-ranging challenges of today's world and the mind-boggling prospects of tomorrow's?"¹⁷

For Guinness, the present problem is that the majority of people to whom preachers communicate are not interested at all. We make the mistake to believe they have an innate openness to what we might communicate. Instead, he believes the message has been so diluted that they arrive with no expectation, no open hearts, and with an even potential hostility to the message,

Almost all our witnessing and Christian communication assumes that people are open to what we have to say, or at least are interested, if not in need of what we are saying. Yet most people quite simply are not open, not interested and not needy, and in much of the advanced modern world fewer people are open today than even a generation ago. Indeed, many are hostile, and their hostility is greater than the Western church has faced for centuries.¹⁸

¹⁷ Os Guinness, *Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

How then can one achieve effective gospel communication for apologetics?

Guinness answers by stating preachers must move from perceived communication tools to effective gospel presentation. In essence, he argues and encourages communicators to return to the tried and simple gospel message found within the Bible. It is only this that will ultimately captivate, through the word of God and by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is to this communicators must not only return to, but what they are to rely upon, “Christian communication is a communication of the gospel that is shaped by our understanding of God’s communication in Christ, just as God’s communication in Christ is shaped by God’s understanding of the condition of our hearts that God addresses in the gospel. Put simply: As God saw, so He sent, and as God sent, so we share.”¹⁹

This can occur in multiple ways, becoming more of an art than a science. The art is to be sensitive to know when to share the gospel through a rational argument and when to show the gospel through a biblical story. The art continues by knowing to whom we communicate and what might readily draw the listener more effectively to the ultimate gospel message. The Bible offers multiple opportunities to communicate through stories, wisdom literature, reason, and emotion. The art is to be continually sensitive to the Holy Spirit in leading hearers to the gospel within all. Guinness provides examples through Scripture and in history, “As any reader can see, the Bible has a high place for truth and rational arguments as well as for stories, drama, parables, and poetry. The Bible contains the book of Romans as well as the Psalms of David and the parables of Jesus. To be sure, stories are at the heart of the biblical view of creative persuasion, but not at the expense

¹⁹ Ibid., 27.

of reason or argument.”²⁰ Guinness uses C.S. Lewis as an example who was able to communicate the gospel through both the imagination and reason, “At times he was coolly rational, as in *Mere Christianity*, while at other times he engaged the imagination brilliantly, as in *The Screwtape Letters* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*. There is a time for stories, and there is a time for rational arguments, and the skill we need lies in knowing which to use, and when.”²¹

Guinness argues truth must always trump technique in communication. Technique has its place, yet too often communicators rely more on their techniques than the power of truth from the person of Christ, the Bible, Christian worship, the Holy Spirit, and the life of the historical Church,

Sad to say, we are more likely to find that recent forms of evangelism are modeled not on classical rhetoric or even on good communication theory, but on handbooks for effective sales techniques. A laudable goal, and one secret of the powerful influence of Francis and Edith Schaeffer’s L’Abri community, was its desire always to “give honest answers to honest questions.” But one recent evangelistic approach roundly rejected this aim. Rather, it taught that in working to “close the deal” (whether a commercial sale or a ‘decision for Christ’), we should always refuse to stop and answer questions, as questions are said to be nothing but a moral smokescreen and therefore a distraction and a delay as we drive toward the desired conclusion.²²

Gospel communicators can rely upon and know the message they share is the way to true and full salvation. Preachers may not answer every question, yet they are to listen to questions and have a heart for those who ask them. This also shows the gospel, as preachers give grace and love as it has been given to us. There is nothing to prove and

²⁰ Ibid., 34.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 40-41.

there is no timetable for the work of the Lord. Instead, one trusts the Holy Spirit is working and using the communication in multiple ways to others, some of which is seen in this earthly life and others will be seen in the life to come.

Joseph Loconte's *The Searchers* uses a well-known biblical story, two men walking to Emmaus following the crucifixion of Jesus to reveal the search of every individual and human heart. He argues that all people, regardless of belief or religion, are on a search for transcendence, a search for God. Many confuse this quest and make it about discovering their earthly home. Even if they believe they have found it, they still continue searching. We are not fulfilled, even by something as good as the fulfilled longing of an earthly home, "When a great crisis sweeps into our lives, when our dreams turn to powder—wherever we are at that moment—something calls us back home. But is the comfort and security of home all that we seek? We may discover, to our surprise, something else, a desire that is not so easily satisfied. Whether we say it or not, we might soon find ourselves on a quest."²³

In this book, Loconte uses many historic and contemporary references, from philosophy, science, literature, and movies, to show the quest all individuals have even if they're not aware of the journey. This book is particularly apt for people in the Bible Belt because of its focus on the search for home. For many in this context, home, family, and even the "home church" becomes the idol they strive to achieve. Even as an active church member, they find themselves still searching for meaning, purpose, and transcendence.

²³ Joseph Loconte, *The Searchers: A Quest for Faith in the Valley of Doubt* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 20.

This goes for the one who questions belief and the one who uses their belief to make them feel they have finally arrived.

Apologetics has been defined as a defense of the gospel. It could also be shared that apologetics is simply showing people what they have missing all along their journey. Loconte uses *The Lord of the Rings* as an illustration in his book. In one account, he shares how the hobbits' fear of the unknown and longing for home, or the Shire, nearly keeps them from fulfilling the call of their lives. The same can be true for all of us, "The experience of going home—if it is a good and happy home—not only can be a comfort to us, it also can become a distraction, something that keeps us from fulfilling a great task or obligation set before us."²⁴ This distraction, "almost causes Frodo to evade the great calling on his life, with all the challenges and sorrows it will bring. So, too, perhaps, with the friends on Emmaus road. They feel that something of the greatest consequence has come into their lives—something to which they'd become deeply devoted—but now it all seems wrong, horribly wrong, and they want to escape it."²⁵

This shows one of our roles as communicators of the gospel is to contrast the illusion of what people believe will bring fulfillment with their great spiritual quest to move closer to God who came to us all in Jesus Christ. We must make real the truth that, "Apparently there is something about everyday life—even in our most satisfying moments—that leaves many people anxious for something else. There seems to be a

²⁴ Ibid., xxi-xxii.

²⁵ Ibid., 21-22.

powerful impulse in human nature to connect with a ‘wondrous, virtuous, transcendent’ figure: to be in the presence of God.”²⁶

Finally, this book is helpful in offering tools to show how both stories we write and stories from culture can be used to communicate the truths of Scripture. An example he uses is how many movies and filmmakers have displayed the presence of God in Christ in their stories. God is hidden in these stories, yet if we look closely he is revealed. This is seen in *Babette’s Feast*, a film based on a short story by Isak Dinesen. Babette is a woman who fled from violence in Paris in 1871 to a small town in Denmark. She meets very religious people who are self-absorbed with themselves and their religion. When Babette wins a lottery, she uses her winnings, as a master chef, to cook an elaborate French meal for members of the community. This meal, “evokes the splendor of a wedding banquet, an image that occurs often in the Bible to describe God’s fellowship with His people, brought safely and finally home. The richness and joy of the meal transforms the guests from gloomy and petty souls into people who have tasted divine mercy.”²⁷ This book can help people see their need for the transcendent, the search they are on, and offer creative tools and mediums for communicating God’s rescue mission by grace.

Lesslie Newbigin wrote *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* affirming the gospel as truth in a world and a time, such as now, denying the possibility of ultimate truth. Newbigin focuses on knowing the truth as individuals, communicating it within the

²⁶ Ibid., 27.

²⁷ Ibid., 38.

Church, and to the society at large. It is highly relevant in how we think about ways to communicate the truth as pastors to the world we inhabit.

For individuals, their starting point is imperative. Newbigin argues the starting point for us all is how we want to be right. In essence, this starting point is sin. Not only do people want to be right, they want Jesus, or the Christian faith, to fall neatly into their own worldview and assumptions, “What is really being asked, of course, is that we should show that the gospel is in accordance with the reigning plausibility structure of our society, that it accords with the assumptions which we normally do not doubt; and that is exactly what we cannot and must not do.”²⁸ Instead, what preachers are to do is “What the Church Fathers and Augustine had to do in the age when classical culture had lost its nerve and was disintegrating.”²⁹ Preachers are to communicate a new starting point for the thoughts of those to whom they communicate. The true starting point is God’s revelation of his being and purpose in Scripture with the central act and work being the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.³⁰ If the starting point is not to be right, but to point to a more profound revelation that explains our desire to be right, we have chosen the right course to begin an apologetic conversation.

What Newbigin also does in this book is connect apologetics to world mission by stating apologetics is not simply communicating all you know, but communicating what you are still learning. This is important for all of us in the Church as we communicate to

²⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 1991, 27.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 28.

individuals and society because it gives us a posture of humility. Often, communication is simply about the knowledge we have attained and not the knowledge we continually receive. He stresses we are all on a journey of learning and thus, receiving, “So mission is not a one-way promotion but a two-way encounter in which we learn more of what the gospel means. We are learning as we go. That is the only way we affirm that the gospel is not just ‘true for us’ but true for all. The missionary action of the Church is the exegesis of the Gospel.”³¹ If we do not have all the truth as followers of Christ, we are equipped as missionaries to bring the fullness of Christ into the works of culture, industry, and politics. Here, apologetics can be seen as both mission to the world as well as discipleship for the one who is communicating the truth, which can be both the preacher and the individual believer in their everyday life.

Discipleship

Concluding this literature review is a focus to discipleship. This should be the effect, the ends, or the fruit of communication through preaching and apologetics. It should also be a means to further communication through individuals in relationships, mentoring, and within smaller groups. Such focus is greatly needed in addressing the communication of the gospel within churches because it can often be sorely needed in both preaching and within the life of churches. As we begin with Dallas Willard, he would maintain that discipleship is indeed the lost art; therefore communicators and preachers need to seriously and prayerfully consider how to implement it into their communication.

³¹ Ibid., 34-35.

Dallas Willard's book *The Great Omission* becomes vital for this review because his emphasis in communication is more countercultural, the opposite of what preachers and communicators may consider. For him, communication initially begins not in speaking our outward expression but in the art of listening itself and being able to listen to others well. When one is able to listen well, they can become more effective communicators. Therefore for Willard, in the area of discipleship, communication first begins with listening. In order for the preachers to be able to listen well, they must have spent much time listening to God and taking time out of their normal routine to pause and rest from consistent pastoral responsibilities.

Far too many pastors and communicators, he would argue, do not listen well. They are unable to listen because they are consistently active. They are always planning, speaking, organizing, and even pastoring. He encourages them to take more time to rest in knowing God is working and to hear Him in solitude, silence, and Sabbath.

Therefore, in order to communicate and disciple well, Sabbath must be implemented into the communicator's life as a discipline and a necessity, "We strongly need to see the manifest hand of God in what we are and what we do. We need to be sure He is pulling the load, bearing the burden—which we are all too ready to assume is up to us alone. We must understand that He is in charge of the outcome of our efforts, and that the outcome will be good, right. And all of this is encompassed in one biblical term, 'Sabbath.'"³² He defines Sabbath even more that it is to be, "a way of life. It sets us free from bondage to our own efforts. Only in this way can we come to the power and joy of a

³² Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 34.

radiant life in ministry and work, a blessing to all we touch. And yet Sabbath is almost totally absent from the existence of contemporary Christians and their ministers.”³³ He then goes even further to give practical and biblical applications to Sabbath,

Three practices or spiritual disciplines are especially helpful in making Sabbath real in the midst of our life: solitude, silence, and fasting. These are three of the central disciplines of abstinence long practiced by the followers of Jesus to help them find and keep a solid footing in the Kingdom that cannot be moved—in the midst of a busy and productive life, or even a life of trial, conflict, and frustration.³⁴

While Willard’s book emphasizes the result of a preacher’s potential lack of rest and listening is their strategic communication to those listeners, it is also a mirror into the lack of discipleship amongst many churches. He highlights the omission and provides insight into individual discipleship. He explains that Jesus, in the Great Commission, gave a different model of life to his followers. He directed them to go and make disciples to all races and nations. It therefore became a global project. These disciples were to be baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and taught to keep all that Jesus had commanded of them. The Church of the first several centuries followed this plan with the result of extensive and deepening church growth.

At this moment, we have arrived, Willard argues, to a place of historical drift to simply making converts and baptizing them into church membership. The result is, “Two great omissions from the Great Commission to stand out. Most important, we start by omitting the making of disciples and enrolling people as Christ’s students, when we should let all else wait for that. Then we also omit, of necessity, the step of taking our

³³ Ibid., 34-35.

³⁴ Ibid.

converts through training that will bring them every increasingly to do what Jesus directed.”³⁵ The book is a call to recover the practices of discipleship within all church communication, from the pulpit to individual relationships. Discipleship means personal teaching, disciplines, and above all, looking to Jesus as our primary teacher.

Tim Keller’s *Shaped by the Gospel* is an updated edition of his book *Center Church*. This book lays out what the gospel is, what it is not, and how to incorporate the gospel into every aspect of church life, from teaching and preaching, to smaller groups, and even to informal conversations. It can be invaluable for any church-wide communication plan centered on teaching the gospel because it gives specific focus on discipleship tools. In terms of communication for discipleship, one of the books main points would be that, “If you are communicating the gospel message, you must not only help listeners distinguish between obeying God and disobeying Him; you must also make clear the distinction between obeying God as a means of self-salvation and obeying God out of gratitude for an accomplished salvation. You will have to distinguish between general, moralistic religion and gospel Christianity.”³⁶ Keller confronts this challenge and offers practical ways for all communication in how a church presents the gospel. He continually connects discipleship to preaching in questioning, “How do we bring the gospel home to people so they see its power and implications? This can take place in a church in several ways. First, a church recovers the gospel through preaching. Preaching

³⁵ Ibid., 5-6.

³⁶ Tim Keller, *Shaped by the Gospel: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in your City* (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan), 119.

is the single venue of information and teaching to which the greatest number of church people are exposed.”³⁷

There are other ways that supplement and point back to the preaching in a church. This book is helpful in that it looks at many other means for discipleship besides preaching in a local church, “The second way for a pastor or leader to recover the gospel in the church is through training of lay leaders who minister the gospel to others. It is critical to arrange a regular and fairly intense time of processing these gospel renewal dynamics with the lay leaders of a church.”³⁸ This can be accomplished through both individual mentoring to lay leadership by the pastor or an intensive, focused small group led by a pastor or church elder.

Another way for discipleship is to foster and cultivate an intentional, biblical small group ministry within the church. These groups are more than social as they are to offer a forum for Bible study, open questions, and opportunities for group mission within the city or world. They can be instructive, engaging, and deeply communal for those in the group,

A third way for a church to foster gospel renewal dynamics is to inject an experimental element into its small group ministry or even to form several groups dedicated to it. Many small group meetings resemble classes in which the Bible is studied or fellowship meetings in which people talk about their burdens and needs, help each other, and pray for each other. While these functions are extremely important, we can learn from leaders of revivals of the past, such as George Whitefield and John Wesley, who encouraged people to form groups of four to eight people to share weekly the degree to which God was real in their hearts, their besetting sins, ways God was dealing with them through the Word, and how their prayer lives were faring.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid., 134.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 135.

Finally, a further way can be viewed as more relational or that of mentoring. This can be very effective as a trusted friendship grows between the mentor and mentee. Questions can be asked openly without fear of what a group may think and there is more time for intentional discipleship to grow within the relationship. It becomes healthy gospel conversation as, “It is in personal conversations that the gospel can be applied specifically and pointedly. When one Christian shares how the gospel as ‘come home’ to him or her and is bringing about major life changes, listeners can ask concrete questions and receive great encouragement to move forward spiritually themselves.”⁴⁰ These relationships can affect the larger congregation when, “Visible, dramatic life turnarounds and unexpected conversions may cause others to do deep self-examination and create a sense of spiritual longing and expectation in the community. The personal revivals going on in these individuals spread informally to others through conversations and relationship. More and more people begin to examine themselves and seek God.”⁴¹ Such recommendations are helpful to cultivate and incorporate the gospel throughout all discipleship in a local church.

Keller returns to preaching and gives instruction for its role in gospel renewal. He writes regardless of other means, preaching must be emphasized. He gives five characteristics of preaching for Gospel renewal: they are to distinguish between religion and the gospel, to preach both the holiness of God and the love of God, to make the truth

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 136.

clear and also make it real, to preach Christ from every text, and to preach to both Christians and non-Christians at once.⁴²

A final book to briefly review is one that can greatly shape both communicators and listeners. It is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*. It is important because discipleship is not "cheap." The way of Jesus always entails a cost. This book is uniquely important in this church's context because so many people see discipleship not as something that provokes and provides an earthly cost, but instead would promote an earthly reward. There is a great reward, here and in the life to come, but in this life, the reward comes with a cost. In the Bible Belt, people tend to view discipleship as a means to gain social relationships, business contacts, and another way to simply feel good about oneself. Communicators and churches must show a different path and Bonhoeffer helps us with that.

Bonhoeffer opens his book with a call for renewal in the preachers and the listeners of churches, "In the last resort, what we want to know is not, what would this or that man, or this or that church, have of us, but what Jesus Christ himself wants of us. When we go to church and listen to the sermon, what we want to hear is His Word—and that not merely for selfish reasons, but for the sake of the many for whom the Church and her message are foreign."⁴³ Communication in a church should move towards helping people see what Jesus wants for us all here. This is the ideal, yet Bonhoeffer rightly asks if we as communicators place barriers upon following Jesus because of our own communication,

⁴² Ibid., 138-141.

⁴³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, Touchstone, 1959), 35.

But perhaps it would be just as well to ask ourselves whether we do not in fact often acts as obstacles to Jesus and his Word. Is it not possible that we cling too closely to our own favourite presentation of the gospel, and to a type of preaching which was all very well in its own time and place and for the social set-up for which it was originally intended? Is there not after all an element of truth in the contention that our preaching is too dogmatic, and hopelessly irrelevant to life? Are we not constantly harping on certain ideas at the expense of others which are just as important? Does not our preaching contain too much of our own opinions and convictions, and too little of Jesus Christ.⁴⁴

As we present Jesus, we present following Him, to be His disciple. We must show the reality of that, “The command of Jesus is hard, unutterably hard, for those who try to resist it. But for those who willingly submit, the yoke is easy and the burden is light. ‘His commandments are not grievous’ (1 John 5:3). The commandment of Jesus is not a sort of spiritual shock treatment. Jesus asks nothing of us without giving us the strength to perform it.”⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer’s book shows Jesus will give us the strength to live into discipleship, that his commandments are not meant to destroy life, but to allow it to truly flourish. He shows grace is not cheap, but costly, for Jesus above all on the cross, and for us as His disciples. We must show that even while difficult, it gives the life we seek, “If we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What decisions and partings will it demand? To answer this question we shall have to go to him, for only he knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him, knows the journey’s end. But we do know that it will be a road of boundless mercy. Discipleship means joy.”⁴⁶ This is indeed good news and the great call of our lives is to show it in words, in church community, and in action.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 37-38.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 38.

In closing, there is a deep contrast to such discipleship compared to what is perceived as the normal, traditional, church-going life found in the Bible Belt. Here, there is an unspoken, general desire to receive this grace, yet for it to be cheap, or even free. It is free as it is grace, but the cost is to give one's life fully, completely, and unconditionally to where the Lord Jesus Christ leads. This may be to the poor, racially diverse, and seemingly socially insignificant place of Jackson. It may be to a nation one has no desire to go to and it could be to a neighbor one has come to dislike or be greatly offended with. Ultimately, the gospel, in preaching, apologetics, and discipleship calls and shows us the things we believe will fulfill us never will and the things or places we might be uncomfortable with or opposed to is where God is calling us to go. The cost seems steep at first, yet the gospel ultimately shows it to be minimal. The communication plan for this church is aimed to greatly assist leading its people to these places, within themselves and to others.

This literature review is a beginning of understanding the full, corporate communication within a church through preaching, apologetics, and discipleship. While limited, it gives a foundation to build an overall theology of communication into a local church. This theology will continue to include the ministry of preaching, apologetics, and discipleship for the congregation. This is the focus on the next chapter before moving onto the specific ministry strategy of communication at Bellwether church.

CHAPTER THREE

THEOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

This chapter presents a theology of communication within a local church through preaching, small group studies, and creative writing that can help lead the congregation more readily into individual apologetics, evangelism, and discipleship. The starting point of this theology of communication begins by defining gospel centered preaching, its effectiveness in a local church, and the reasoning of preaching being the foundation behind all further communication in a church wide communication program for discipleship. After the ministry of preaching, there is a transition to further communication for the congregation, first within curriculum studies for small groups and then to the writing of weekly devotions and further creative works of fiction and plays for the church body.

Gospel Centered Preaching

There is a great need for gospel centered preaching in churches within this given context. The surrounding culture prioritizes the individual, leaving many congregations centered on what the church and its teaching can do for themselves and their families. Preachers must therefore more fully grasp and continually assert the primacy of Jesus

Christ, helping their congregants discover his redemptive work in the Bible. It is important for preachers and communicators to understand both the centrality and pitfalls of gospel centered preaching, learning to prepare and present it more effectively. Grant Wacker, writing in *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation*, his biography of Billy Graham, notes how Graham always attempted to simplify and clarify the gospel message to his listeners,

The message could be summarized in—or reduced to, according to one's point of view—something like a dozen words: Bible, God, sin, Jesus Christ, new birth, growth in grace, second coming, reward (or punishment), and mission. Of course, Graham knew that theologians used formal labels for each of these constants—authority, Trinity, depravity, Christology, soteriology, justification, redemption, sanctification, eschatology, and evangelization, among others—but he preferred the language of everyday experience.¹

Charles Bridges, writing in the nineteenth century, makes the similar claim of the need for preachers to focus and establish the gospel clearly in their communication for their ministries to be fruitful, “Nothing but the truth of the Gospel can be instrumental to the conversion of souls. Any willful suppression—or any compromising statement of truth, dishonours the Holy Spirit in his own special office, and therefore restrains his quickening influence.”² Many preachers will not preach the gospel either because they are not knowledgeable of its power or they believe their congregation may not desire to hear it, choosing instead to entertain their listeners with what they believe are more relevant stories or wisdom. The communicator can often be an extremely skilled speaker, yet not a capable proclaimer of the gospel of Christ crucified.

¹ Grant Wacker, *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 33.

² Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (East Peoria, IL: Vera Press, Inc., 2009), 243.

Only the gospel preached will bring salvation and true renewal to individuals, revitalize relationships, and transform a community. As Paul writes in 2 Cor. 5:16-17, “From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” Knowing and believing in the gospel can change attitudes within all relationships in a community. 2 Cor. 5:20-21 claims, “Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Therefore preaching must show “The spiritual inefficacy of mere lectures on morality, irrespective of the Gospel. If they convert the brute into the man, they will never accomplish that higher and indispensable change of converting the man into the saint.”³ To accomplish gospel centered preaching, the starting point for preachers and preaching is the text of the Bible.

Gospel centered preaching begins in the text of Scripture as the authoritative Word of God. If the preaching does have this biblical base as its starting point then, “The preacher’s speech is in jeopardy and we have nowhere to stand. Inadequate ecclesiology is often at the bottom of our ineffective hermeneutics. The Scripture is not just text, it is Scripture, canon.”⁴ God gives the Bible to teach, instruct, inspire, and convict. There is power, not of opinion or philosophy, but supernatural, Holy Spirit infused power. Lack of

³ Ibid., 245.

⁴ William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 13.

biblical knowledge becomes rampant in congregations that do not always know or understand the Bible.

This is true even in the context of the Bible Belt. The Bible is a culturally acceptable icon that very few have studied deeply, let alone been adept to discover the crucified Christ in every passage. It remains the preacher's task to help them see the metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration more clearly, or even for some of the most regular church attenders, for the first time. Bryan Chapell, in *Christ Centered Preaching* gives the reminder that,

Scripture's portrayal of its own potency challenges us always to remember that the Word preached, rather than the *preaching* of the Word, accomplishes heaven's purposes. Preaching that is true to Scripture converts, convicts, and eternally changes the souls of men and women because God's Word is the instrument of divine compulsion, not because preachers have any power in themselves to stimulate such godly transformations (although human powers can certainly bring about all kinds of worldly changes, including those that masquerade as the products of heaven).⁵

The instrument of divine compulsion is not personality or persuasion, but the Word of God in Scripture. Correct communication is therefore crucial in bringing about personal and corporate change, modeling the discipleship patterns found within it to bring about true godly transformations.

Billy Graham's own theology of preaching began with the starting point of Scripture and its message to humanity as, "Logically, if not always in practice, Graham's thinking about this subject started with the problem of authority. Who or what established the final rule of measurement for everything Christians should believe and practice? The answer, of course, resided in a single source, the Bible. That sacred text talked about

⁵ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2005), 27. Emphasis original.

many things but above all God, humans, and God's relationship with humans."⁶

Graham's communication is an example that the starting point for gospel centered preaching remains and lies within the text of Scripture.

Often one can easily mistake the power of a preacher's personal presence or communication gifts for the power of God's word. For effective communicators, listeners can easily rely heavily on the communicator's gifts or an emotional impact they provide instead of the internal potency of the Word preached. If one is not a naturally gifted communicator, they may readily feel as if they are not able to captivate an audience and accomplish heaven's purposes without a more persuasive style. These traps are critical errors in preaching the gospel to a congregation. The apostle Paul is an example to mitigate such misunderstandings, "The bookish missionary who was not known for his pulpit expertise nonetheless wrote, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for...everyone who believes' (Romans 1:16). As students of elementary Greek soon learn, the word for 'power' in this verse is *dunamis*, from which get the English word *dynamite*. The gospel's force lies beyond the power of the preacher."⁷

Instead of a pronounced focus on a communicator's natural gifts, the Bible directs both the preacher and the listeners to the supernatural activity and power of the Holy Spirit through the written text given by God to exhort and expound upon as well as to rely upon it in their prayer and preparation. The supernatural presence and power of the gospel by the Holy Spirit can surpass any and all natural efforts, gifting, philosophical reasoning, or performance techniques by the speaker. In his preaching, Billy Graham

⁶ Wacker, *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation*, 33.

⁷ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 28. Emphasis original.

“Made clear that he did not come to entertain, and second, he served only as a mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit.”⁸ In addition, this reliance on the Holy Spirit over and above his own communication gifts contributed to his ability to trust God’s own work through the spoken word of preaching as, “Clearly, when he stepped behind the pulpit he already knew pretty much what he was going to say, but working from notes allowed a kind of flexibility that old-time Methodist camp meeting speakers had called ‘liberty in the Spirit.’ That sense also proved enormously empowering, for it freed Graham from responsibility for the final outcome. This was God’s charge to keep, not his.”⁹

Martyn Lloyd-Jones also consistently emphasized and encouraged preachers and their preaching to adopt a fervent and continual reliance on the Holy Spirit in their communication. He uses Paul as well to convey this supernatural power in articulating the gospel, “He did not talk about himself, nor his experiences, nor his gifts; he preached Jesus Christ, and him crucified. ‘And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.’ That is it! Power of God! Not the wisdom of men.”¹⁰ In Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ own preaching ministry, reliance upon the Holy Spirit was the primary means of its effectiveness and the reason behind any results it attained. Iain H. Murray writes of his emphasis on the Holy Spirit over and above rhetorical talent and sharpness of mind,

⁸ Wacker, *America’s Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation*, 56.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁰ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Joy Unspeakable: Power & Renewal in the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1984), 123-124.

In his view, one could possess the natural ability and the understanding of the truth necessary to follow the expository method, and yet still never be a preacher at all. The Holy Spirit must be active in true preaching, active not only in owning the truth as it is heard but active in anointing the preacher himself. Only then is his heart as well as his mind rightly engaged and the result is speech attended by liveliness, by unction and by an extemporaneous element.¹¹

If preachers do not begin and base their message in the crucified Christ, using biblical references and themes, preaching, “Becomes an endless search for topics, therapies, and techniques that will win approval, promote acceptance, advance a cause, or soothe worry.”¹² Scripture is often used as a springboard for a topical theme or a message of pragmatic moralism that ultimately leads to the avoidance of the radical nature of grace and the amazing, offensive spectacle of a crucified Christ revealed in Scripture. When this occurs, “Instead of the sermon being made from the text, the text is made from the sermon. It is read as customary introduction. It furnishes the occasion of the discursive inquiry, but its component parts, or its connection with the context, are left untouched. This method—besides that it loses the office of the expositor—seems scarcely to acknowledge due reverence for the word of God.”¹³

In such communication the main point becomes not the text and its application to the hearers, but the idea or the ideas the communicator attempts and desires to promote; therefore, he or she becomes the focal point rather than God’s word to the congregation from the text. Instead, the communication in preaching should creatively and steadily help draw the hearers to Christ and his salvific work. Billy Graham’s preaching followed

¹¹ Iain H. Murray, *The Life of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones 1899-1981* (East Peoria, IL: Vera Press, Inc., 2013), 307-308.

¹² Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 32.

¹³ Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 197-198.

this aim as, “The theological content, rhetorical structure, and style of Graham’s sermons flowed together to secure a single aim: to draw men and women to make a decision for Christ. Whatever the specific topic, the overarching pattern invariably took the same form. First, acknowledge sin’s destructive power. Second embrace God’s redeeming power.”¹⁴ As the entirety of the biblical text points to Jesus Christ, the entirety of the preaching out of the biblical text should point the people back to Christ, regardless of its starting point and the illustrations it might seek to offer.

A primary reason many who attend and are connected to a local church do not know the Bible is the result of unbiblical preaching. Preachers may choose or use other books for a message, yet ultimately, “The sermons which are drawn from other books than God’s book will be poor and unspiritual. Let the substance of our text be first beaten out from the pure word of God, and then digested in meditation and prayer.”¹⁵ Every effort must be made to help people come to know the Bible. Techniques, illustrations, and relevant connections can assist to engage, “But there is yet greater need that you and I who preach should let the people see that we are men of the Bible, that we know its letter and are possessed by its spirit, that out of it directly comes the support of our own religious life and the food which we offer in our preaching.”¹⁶

This highlights the great need for communicators to know the gospel in Scripture and to appropriate the truths they preach, so that hearers can readily see and connect that the messenger who preaches and the message they give are united. When the preacher’s

¹⁴ Wacker, *America’s Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation*, 63.

¹⁵ Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 211.

¹⁶ Phillips Brooks, *The Joy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1989), 180.

lifestyle and their teaching are undoubtedly aligned, a deep sense of authentication for the listeners can be achieved. Hearers see clearly how the gospel has shaped and formed the life of the one communicating it to the degree they have been changed by it, and are convicted in their desire that it can easily change others as well.

Finally, preaching is the primary way the gospel is communicated through the biblical text. It is not altogether the only way, yet it is historically the manner the gospel has been most widely presented through the Scripture. Kevin Vanhoozer maintains, “Preaching is perhaps the supreme instance of ‘faith speaking understanding.’ Indeed, the preacher’s *raison d’être* is to minister the word, that is, to minister greater understanding of the faith to people of faith and to move them toward the obedience of faith.”¹⁷

Throughout the history of the church, the preaching of God’s word is the primary way the gospel and the kingdom of God have advanced through the multitude of individual churches proclaiming it across cultures, nations, and languages. It is the greatest tool to help the listeners gain an, “Understanding, a grasp of what a situation requires of us, because gospel sermons ultimately minister reality. They orient us to God, the world, and ourselves by reminding us of what God, in Christ through the Spirit, is doing in the world with and for us.”¹⁸ Regardless of ethnicity, race, language, and socioeconomic status, the human condition remains the same. The gospel in the biblical text penetrates, provokes, and challenges as it is presented clearly to all in every cultural context.

¹⁷ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 131.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

The gospel in Scripture orients our hearts towards Jesus Christ as the mediator and redeemer of humanity. The preacher's primary duty in communication is to present and portray this gospel truth with excellence, unfettered by trends or public speaking gimmicks. Preaching should remind the listeners of who they are in Christ as well as the role they can play in his story and redemptive plan for the world, "What sets Christian preaching apart from every other form of discourse is not only its authoritative source (Scripture) and unique content (gospel), but also its function as the primary means by which God's word cultivates Christ in the believer. Preaching is a means of grace because it presents, and makes present, Christ and what is in Christ."¹⁹

Gospel communication is therefore not preaching from Scripture to show wisdom, helpful advice, or relevant stories, but to present Jesus Christ as God incarnate, becoming flesh, living, dying, and resurrecting to be Savior and Lord for all. Gospel communication is to, "Preach Christ Jesus the Lord. Determine to know nothing among your people, but Christ crucified. Let his name and grace, his spirit and love, triumph in the midst of all your sermons."²⁰ Preachers and their preaching must aim to show in their communication and to the others in their midst, in Scripture, that redemption has been accomplished and applied by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

Often, rather than preaching Christ, there can be a tendency towards using a sermon to compare Christianity to the world, how it can relate to the world, or how it is different from the world. Instead, messages should be centered to show what God has done in the world through Jesus Christ, "The congregation is both those who are being

¹⁹ Ibid., 131.

²⁰ Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 258.

saved by the gospel and those who are in the world. But we do not know the ‘world’ until the gospel describes it. The gospel teaches us to name that world, a world that is both God’s creation and God’s greatest problem.”²¹ This helps listeners see and understand more fully how God has not remained outside our world, but instead he, God himself, has entered into our world, allowing himself to become human and ultimately giving up his own life for the sake of all others.

Instead of preaching about Christianity in the world, preaching should be centered in Christ, “To discuss the relations of Christianity and science, Christianity and society, Christianity and politics is good. To set Christ forth to men so that they shall know Him, and in gratitude and love become His, that is far better.”²² Therefore the communication of preaching should primarily help people discover, understand, and love Jesus Christ, as they continually come to know him as shown in Scripture.

It can be challenging for preachers to consistently point people to Jesus Christ throughout the Bible, as not all passages are clear to hearers in leading them to see Christ in Scripture. Indeed, connecting Christ throughout all of Scripture takes much time, effort, thought, and prayer. Yet when preachers make the connection from any given biblical text to the metanarrative centered in Jesus Christ, that of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration, even in the most difficult or challenging passages of Scripture, it is rich for both the preacher and the hearer. Charles Bridges addresses this challenge,

Now every part of the Bible contains the Gospel *substantially, but not formally*. We must not therefore force unnatural interpretations on Holy Writ for the purpose of constantly introducing the name of Christ. As all the principles and

²¹ Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*, 17.

²² Brooks, *The Joy of Preaching*, 35.

duties of the Gospel bear a relation more or less direct to Him, their enforcement *upon the ground of this relation*, is as strictly conformed to the Apostolic pattern, as would be the most complete exhibition of his sufferings and death. Only let us be careful, that his name throws life and glory upon all our Ministrations, and that every sermon tends to draw sinners to him, and to establish Christians in their consistent profession.²³

For such reasons, it becomes vital for communicators to learn, study, and meditate upon the greater gospel's metanarrative trajectory of creation, fall, redemption, restoration, increasingly gaining an understanding of the Bible as this great story. Such knowledge and perspective will aid the communicators, allowing them to present the gospel across the entirety of the biblical text.

Ultimately, the overarching essence of any preaching ministry is based upon what Jesus Christ has done as shown throughout the whole of Scripture. This gives greater focus to Bible as the story of God's creation, humanity's fall, redemption through the finished work of Christ, and God's continual restoration of his world through his Spirit and his Church. As preachers communicate, they can creatively present this story through the means of all the individual stories in the Bible with the primary dramatic act being the redemption brought about by Jesus Christ. In doing so gospel preaching reveals, "Jesus is the central character in the drama of redemption for he is both covenant Lord and Servant, the God-man Mediator (Romans 1:1-6). His story contributes to our self-understanding because we now see ourselves as the beneficiaries of his utterly unique and marvelous work."²⁴

²³ Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 240. Emphasis original.

²⁴ Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine*, 132.

Preaching this story can assist the listeners, as well as the preachers themselves, in discovering their own identity in Christ and seeing their place in his ongoing redemptive work in the world today. As preachers are able to make this connection, “we see that our lives have cosmic significance. In our daily dying and rising, God is busy making something out of nothing, life out of death. So the preacher loves to lay the Christian tradition next to our lives in such a way that we see the story of Jesus as nothing less than our own.”²⁵ Therefore such preaching leads others to see and have a new identity and self-understanding through Jesus Christ in that,

True identity is not a function of ethnicity or any other kind of denominational label, including church denominations, but rather of one’s relationship to Jesus Christ: “Whoever is not with me is against me” (Matt. 12:30; Luke 11:23). The good news is that we do not need to act like Christ in order to be right with God: Christ has acted on our behalf and now invites us to act on his behalf. The best means of true character development is therefore theodramatic self-understanding: understanding oneself as caught up in God’s play of making all things new in and through Christ.²⁶

In Jesus Christ, one’s identity no longer resides in race, status, location, or position, yet instead one’s identity is centered in Christ, as a child of God adopted into his family of believers.

Gospel centered communication begins in Scripture, directs the hearers to Jesus Christ crucified, and helps them take further steps as his disciple. The preaching should lead to action as, “the purpose of the ministry of the word is to reproduce it in people’s lives. Preaching is a prompt: a timely reminder that both informs and incites to action, the action being the inner realization of Christ’s rule. Preaching helps us to find ourselves in

²⁵ Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*, 16.

²⁶ Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine*, 131.

Christ in order to act Christ out.”²⁷ Gospel communication should always help the listeners in taking steps to further conform to Christ, “Insofar as sermons insert us into the drama of redemption and hence help us to understand our parts, accept our identities, and grow into our assigned roles—to that extent they become ministerial aids in transforming us into the image of the one whose words define reality. Preaching is a prompt to put on Christ.”²⁸ Preaching then, is not an end in itself nor is it only a means to help the listeners to see and hear the gospel. It is to have a desired effect that the people who listen become more like Jesus Christ in their actions, conversations, and daily lives. Such communication should help people realize and authenticate this life in Christ. C.S. Lewis makes evident this literal and active work of Christ in the life of the believer,

And let me make it quite clear that when Christians say the Christ-life is in them, they do not mean simply something mental or moral. When they speak of being ‘in Christ’ or of Christ being ‘in them’, this is not simply a way of saying that they are thinking about Christ or copying Him. They mean that Christ is actually operating through them; that the whole mass of Christians are the physical organism through which Christ acts—that we are His fingers and muscles, the cells of His body.²⁹

Preaching is not the only way, yet it is a primary way to help others grow into disciples, witnesses, and ambassadors for Christ. Phillips Brooks writes that preaching should connect the message of Jesus Christ and always be a witness for Jesus Christ, “‘This is the message which we have heard of Him and declare unto you,’ says St. John in his first Epistle. ‘We are His witnesses of these things,’ says St. Peter before the Council at Jerusalem. In these two works together, I think, we have the fundamental

²⁷ Ibid., 134.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 63-64.

conception of the matter of all Christian preaching.”³⁰ The message in preaching is also a witness in itself and the message should be designed to help others grow as witnesses. Thus, the communication is not only the preaching as a message, it is also the preacher as a witness of something that has happened to him or her with the message that it can also happen as well to those hearing it. There is a call to see that the gospel message can fundamentally altar and shape one’s life whereby they become a witness for Christ in the world.

When preachers do preach the Bible as the Word of God, focusing upon Scripture, pointing to Jesus Christ, and providing hearers with a call to following him in their daily discipleship, the preacher is both a witness and a messenger. As this occurs, the communicator and their gifts become secondary with the Word of God and its message to hearers being primary. This can even empower and inspire the most ordinary of preachers and sermons,

Among the many sermons I have heard, I always remember one, for the wonderful way in which it was pervaded by this quality. It was a sermon by Mr. George McDonald, the English author, who was in this country a few years ago; and it had many of the good and bad characteristics of his interesting style. It had his brave and manly honesty, and his tendency to sentimentality. But over and through it all it had this quality; it was a message from God to these people by him. The man struggled with language as a child struggled with his imperfectly mastered tongue, that will not tell the errand as he received it, and has it in his mind. As I listened, I seemed to see how weak in contrast was the way in which other preachers had amused me and challenged my admiration for the workings of their minds. Here was a gospel. Here were real tidings. And you listened and forgot the preacher.³¹

³⁰ Brooks, *The Joy of Preaching*, 31.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

In such communication, there should be a call for others to repent, receive, follow, and go out into their present, everyday world as witnesses of this message and gospel. The point then for preaching becomes not simply organizing and presenting a good speech or showcasing an extraordinary ability of language. Gospel communication urges and calls people to respond, openly admit their need for God, love others as they have been loved, and even potentially give their own lives as a sacrifice. These attributes form a call to personal and corporate discipleship within a local church congregation and this should be the aim of effective preaching.

Finally, in the communication of preaching, there should be the consistent element of hope. This hope is to be hope for all who hear the proclaimed gospel. It is a hope in what Christ has done in the past by his work on the cross. Preaching should give people hope for the present that God is at work and ultimate hope in the coming resurrection and future reign of Christ in the new heavens and earth.

One example of communication that consistently possessed great hope in the work of God, even at times when there was reason to give up hope was that of Frederick Douglass. As a former slave and prophet, he proclaimed hope in God for the oppressed and this hope always undergirded his communication. Because of this hope he, “drew strength and substance from a Christian understanding of God as a good and all-powerful being at work in history.”³² Even during the long years of the Civil War, “Douglass relied on a spirit of prophetic hope to make sense of the conflict—to discern its ultimate meaning and God’s purposes in it.”³³ Throughout his life and ministry, “Douglass’s powerful

³² Dilbeck, *Frederick Douglass: America’s Prophet*, 94.

³³ *Ibid.*, 102.

prophetic words to America, especially to its Christians, might sometimes sound hopelessly hostile, as if fueled by nothing more than disparaging hate. But hope, not hate, fueled Douglass—not anger alone but also love. He did not lose faith in the true Christianity of Christ and the justice of the God of the oppressed.”³⁴

From Preaching to Further Communication

Up to this point, it has been maintained that preaching is the primary way for the gospel to be communicated in a local church. However, for a church to have a strategic, overarching, and effective communication plan, it must be clarified that preaching alone is not the only way. If preaching is to be the only way gospel communication occurs within a church, then while the gospel may be presented in an effective manner from the pulpit through its sermons, the church is not using all its resources to assist its congregation in understanding and implementing the gospel in their present lives. In contrast, such saturation can occur through other means of communication by more focused teaching in a class setting, conversation within smaller groups, and study tools the church provides for further personal study, reflection, and in individual mentoring relationships. Therefore, if preaching and Sunday messages are the sole focus of a church, disciples will not be adequately formed and the congregation will not fully know how to help the gospel advance into the lives of others around them, both in and out of the church.

Colin Marshall and Tony Payne write about the challenge faced when preaching is the only means of discipleship in *The Trellis and the Vine*. They claim such an approach is unhealthy and unfruitful for a church as it cultivates this culture of being

³⁴ Ibid., 163.

centered primarily on the preaching of Sunday messages. This places all the emphasis on the pastor and their preaching as, “For a start, the ministry that takes place in the congregation will be limited to the gifts and capacity of the pastor: how effectively he preaches, and how many people he can personally know and counsel. In this model, it becomes very difficult for the congregation to grow past a given ceiling (usually between 100 and 150 members).”³⁵ It can also lead a church congregation into unknowingly encouraging a culture of consumerism as, “It perfectly fits the spirit of our age whereby we pay trained professionals to do everything for us rather than do it ourselves—whether cleaning our car, ironing our shirts, or walking our dog.”³⁶ This leads to the focus of the congregation to always be on the weekly worship service, while people within the church are not trained or encouraged to move into individual and corporate discipleship with one another and to others outside their community. Thus, in such a culture, “The tendency is for Christian life and fellowship to be reduced to an hour and a quarter on Sunday morning, with little or no relationship, and very little actual ministry taking place by the congregation themselves.”³⁷

Churches should instead focus time and energy on presenting the gospel, beginning from the sermon, and then clarifying it within equipping classes, in written devotions for the congregation, to small group studies, and even in short stories or plays for the church body. This can build and ferment a different model and healthier climate for a church body, “One in which the prayerful speaking of the word is central, and in

³⁵ Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine* (Kingsford, NSW Australia: Matthias Media, 2009), 94.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., 95.

which Christians are trained and equipped to minister God's word to others. Our congregations become centers of training where people are trained and taught to be disciples of Christ who, in turn, seek to make other disciples."³⁸ Over time, this can forge a different culture within the church where there are multiple ways to teach, train, and produce more discipleship within the church and relational evangelism as church members engage their daily world. In such a church culture, "The sermon is a rallying call. It is where the whole congregation can together feed on God's word and be challenged, comforted, and edified. The public preaching ministry is like a framework that sets the standard and agenda for all the other word ministries that take place."³⁹

Far too many churches have the former model of being heavily reliant upon the preaching entrenched into their congregation. The aim of churches should be to move past this model, as challenging as that may prove to be, in order to promote, encourage, offer, and equip others to learn the gospel and be able to communicate it to others. As this occurs, churches can become more fruitful as all ministry engagement is not centralized in the work and communication of one person, the preaching pastor, or solely in Sunday morning worship services.

A starting point to grow this culture is to begin an equipping class in the life of the church where members are intentionally trained for discipleship, apologetics, and evangelism. Such an equipping class would be designed to be more of a teaching class than a relational small group, although the hope would be that relationships would be formed and cemented within it. This class could have its foundation and teaching

³⁸ Ibid., 99.

³⁹ Ibid., 102.

beginning from the preaching and sermons and then move church members into a fuller and deeper understanding of the messages preached on Sunday mornings. From this equipping class further ministries within the church can potentially be birthed as it would produce capable leaders for small group studies and initiate mission ministries that could impact the local city where the church is located as well as global partnerships and outreach efforts.

This class would be designed to be a more intentional time to discuss essential Christian doctrines and make theology itself more real, applicable, and relatable. Such a setting can help the people of the class see their beliefs anew and become more familiar with these historic doctrines that form the bedrock of their faith. Many may initially feel these doctrines are not relevant or practical, yet C.S. Lewis argues, “Doctrines are not God: they are only a kind of map. But that map is based on the experiences of hundreds of people who really were in touch with God—experiences compared with which any thrills or pious feelings you and I are likely to get on our own are very elementary and very confused. And secondly, if you want to get further, you must use the map.”⁴⁰

This equipping class will not only help people learn the map of doctrine, they will be able to do so in a community where they can discuss and even wrestle with these beliefs to implement them in their lives and grow in their faith. Lewis makes this important connection between doctrinal belief and a lived out faith in, “But you will not get to Newfoundland by studying the Atlantic that way, and you will not get eternal life by simply feeling the presence of God in flowers and music. Neither will you get

⁴⁰ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 154.

anywhere by looking at maps without going to the sea. Nor will you be very safe if you go to sea without a map.”⁴¹

Such a class will also allow participants to gain knowledge and clarity in the right beliefs of historic Christian doctrine, rather than what they might believe they know from secular worldviews or a set of beliefs that could be outside that of orthodox Christian faith. Therefore, the class can be highly relevant and practical for its participants because, “Everyone reads, everyone hears things discussed. Consequently, if you do not listen about Theology, that will not mean that you have no ideas about God. It will mean that you have a lot of wrong ones—bad, muddled, out-of-date ideas. For a great many of the ideas about God which are trotted out as novelties today are simply the ones which real Theologians tried centuries ago to be rejected.”⁴²

Another way to begin to grow this culture is for the pastor or a team of pastoral leaders, elders, and writers to produce written devotions for the church members with the Sunday sermons or sermon series as a starting point. This can be a helpful way to engage the congregation, particularly those who miss Sunday morning worship or those who do not attend regularly. This allows more of the church congregation to be connected with the overall teaching from the pulpit.

The written format of devotions can be accomplished in multiple ways. The first could be a weekly or even daily devotion connected to the biblical passage or theme of the sermon. These devotions could be submitted out through a church member email, the church’s website, and on the church’s social media. Such devotions would focus on

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 155.

different points of the sermon or go deeper into minor points with further Scripture not addressed in the message to allow the people to learn more and connect with different biblical passages. The devotions are also creative opportunities to provoke the imagination of the congregation by way of using different metaphors, stories, and current examples where people could connect more with the messages and the Scripture being used. C.S. Lewis is a model for such use in much of his own writing. Although writers in the church may not possess his eloquence, they can learn from him in crafting these devotions so they produce stronger connections for those who read them. George Marsden shares as a life-long student of literature and words, as well as a lover of stories and mythology, he was always, “So immersed was he in the art of metaphor that it was simply part of the way he thought about things. At the same time he employed his habit of razor-sharp critical reasoning to keep his imagination in bounds. Further, because he was a Christian, those bounds were also shaped by a tradition to which he was deeply committed.”⁴³

The format of written devotions can be helpful for church members as well as its overall preaching ministry in at least three ways. The devotion serves as a reminder of the sermon itself and allows the message to remain in the listener’s mind. Often, people can be initially moved or impacted when they first hear the sermon, yet then move on into their weekly schedule, filled with work appointments and family activities. The devotion helps one recall how God spoke to them through the sermon. If a member of the congregation is not actively participating in a daily devotion, this also provides an opportunity for them to have one for their use. The devotions can also be a tool for

⁴³ George Marsden, *C.S. Lewis’s Mere Christianity: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 180-181.

evangelism as many in this church context keep Sunday worship separate from their weekly activities. Therefore, the devotions serve as both a continual connection and bridge to the preaching in worship services and their everyday life. Such a strategy of written devotions distributed amongst the church body can help incorporate or begin regular reflection and meditation for their spiritual growth.

If a person was absent on Sunday, the devotion can provoke curiosity to listen to the message on the church's website or social media network. This can be effective in keeping more people connected to the Sunday morning teaching, even if they were absent. They have a greater opportunity to remain engaged and connected to the preaching and life of the church. For many within a congregation, it becomes all too easy to be disconnected when they do not attend regularly or do not participate in church ministries outside of Sunday worship. Thus, these regular devotions offer an opportunity to keep the people of the church focused within the community each week, even when they do not attend regularly.

Finally, these written devotions are a means for people to potentially think more deeply about the message and connect further in Scripture. The biblical text used in the devotion could be passages from the sermon, or passages and verses connected to it for the members to delve deeper into the biblical text of the teaching. Often, the sermon does not allow sufficient time for a church member to process or fully connect the idea of the sermon with Scripture. Therefore, this is a tool to help people consider and reflect upon the message and how it might be relevant to their present situation. For these reasons, written devotions can be extremely helpful in contributing to greater biblical literacy, understanding, and developing discipleship within a congregation.

Another opportunity would be for written devotions to connect with a specific, topical sermon series. While these written devotions accomplish the same purpose of individual devotions, a continual series based on a topic such as a biblical view or relationships, finances, work, rest, parenting, marriage, reconciliation, or cultural engagement gives a continuous theme. The hope is it will help the reader continue to be engaged and involved to form a trajectory of growth in the given area. This can be effective in creating a narrative flow for the congregation as they participate in the sermon series, yet broken down into the component parts of the written devotions each week.

Overall, these written devotions give communicators and preachers within a church more opportunity to connect with as many people in the congregation as possible. Even if they are not widely read, there is the likelihood many would use them and the written devotions could build momentum for both the Sunday sermons and further written devotions. This offers another way for people in the church to remain connected, particularly if they are not involved in a smaller group within the church body or other church ministries.

A challenge to these written devotions within the church context of the Bible Belt would be whether they contribute to the pervading mentality of a consumer oriented Christian life. Therefore, much assessment and overview would be needed to see whether these devotions do truly contribute to healthy discipleship within a local church, or instead lead people to an unhealthy reliance upon regular writings provided by the pastor and other church leaders. One way to circumvent this challenge would be to continually engage the people of the church to writing these devotions. If more of the entire

congregation were included in this ministry, it could foster discipleship by allowing the church's members to contribute, thereby having them think, reflect, and write about what they were learning from the church's preaching ministry. It could be a unique opportunity for their personal growth and to enlarge the overall ministry outreach of the entire congregation.

Another means of diversifying church communication as well as leveraging a desire for personal relationships within the congregation would be through establishing effective and engaging smaller groups. Church members and visitors consistently seek to connect and desire to grow fruitful relationships with similar and different people. These groups can provide a forum for deep discussion and a platform for probing questions. Having a diverse array of small groups in the church body can greatly assist in meeting the needs of relationships, community, and intentional discipleship with church communication.

Such small groups have been effective means of growth throughout the history of the Church. Thomas Kidd writes that Whitefield's experience within smaller groups continually led him to emphasize their necessity for Christian believers, "Escaping the dangers of lukewarm religion, Whitefield insisted, required surrounding oneself with like-minded believers. They could bolster a Christian's faith as he in turn bolstered theirs. He lauded the benefits of belonging to such a group."⁴⁴ In fact, these groups can find examples and models in the holy clubs begun by Whitefield, John Wesley, and his brother Charles while studying in Oxford. They contributed much to their own formation and

⁴⁴ Thomas S. Kidd, *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 39.

discernment of God's call to ministry as they participated in prayer, fellowship, devotion, and local ministry. Arthur Dallimore further describes these groups that offer a model for Christian community, accountability, and mission,

Its members practiced early rising and lengthy devotions, and strove for a self-discipline which left no moment wasted throughout the day. At nightfall they wrote a diary which enabled them to scrutinize their actions and condemn themselves for any fault. They partook of the Eucharist every Sunday, fasted each Wednesday and Friday, and hallowed Saturday as the Sabbath of Preparation for the Lord's Day. They revered the Church of England with unthinking devotion, believed in the Apostolic succession of its priesthood and obeyed many of its unused canons. They sought to persuade others to refrain from evil and attend church. They regularly visited Oxford's prisons (the Castle and the Bocardo) and the Poor House, and each member contributed to a fund with which they relieved the needs of the inmates and maintained a school for the prisoners' children. This programme of endeavor, aided by these works of charity, they believed, somehow ministered towards the salvation of their souls.⁴⁵

Often however, there are questions and challenges on what a church's small groups should study and discuss during their time together. In lieu of these challenges and circumstances, written church small group studies from the sermon or sermon series can play a great role in addressing the need for focused and streamlined communication. These small group studies can be written by the pastor, communicator, or a team of pastoral leaders in order to connect the sermons into a small group study. This written work can be a helpful tool to engage the people present to conversation, discussion, and personal growth in the areas of discipleship and apologetics. Within the confines of a smaller group environment, the people are given a safe space to openly ask questions, think deeply, get feedback, further their biblical literacy, and allowed to challenge different worldviews or assumptions. Such a constructive time and place can be

⁴⁵ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the 18th - Century Revival Volume 1* (East Peoria, IL: Versa Press, Inc., 2009), 67-68.

instrumental and foundational in shaping members of the church with the gospel while allowing small group leaders to become better teacher facilitators of the group they lead.

The small group studies and curriculum could be outlined in multiple ways. One option would be to focus the study with primary biblical passages from the sermon along with secondary passages not mentioned in the sermon yet connected to the primary text or topic. The written small group study could present main ideas and questions that arise from these biblical texts. This can allow the group to consider more fully, gain greater understanding, and respond to the ideas, context, and meaning of what God reveals to them in Scripture. The studies could also be more designed for application than the sermon itself, as small group leaders assist in facilitating discussion as to where individual group members are in relation to the message given and what is read or learned from the Scripture passages used as they discuss together. Such application allows an opportunity for group members to share about their struggles, reservations, relationships, and spiritual journey.

The written communication of small group curriculum also helps the church's small groups be more connected to the Sunday sermon messages and for the people within the group to be more formed together as they discuss the same passages. With this strategy, a local church can be united and aligned into a healthy community. Even while the group is unified in using the same written study, there is simultaneously a robust diversity amongst individuals, leading to a different array of ideas, thoughts, and questions. Diversity is crucial for the individuals within the group to see different aspects or angles of the gospel in the biblical text they might not notice or comprehend otherwise.

In addition, different small groups could place an emphasis on an issue, idea, theme, or focus than another, allowing a wide range of multiplicity upon the church's entire small group ministry. The Bible and the gospel are rich with a variety of entry points and facets for any group to mine, even if all the groups began at the same starting point. One group might focus on aspects of grace while another could discover illustrations of justice or another could directly apply it to their work or family. One group could decide upon focusing its study on ways they as individuals could reach out to their local community while another would aim to see how the gospel contributes to their understanding of racial reconciliation and cultural renewal, using such knowledge and growth to form a more global church. These groups can contribute much witness to the gospel's impact within themselves as individuals, the life of their local church, and the surrounding community.

These small groups can also combat consistent tendencies in the church that lean towards complacency and spiritual inaction. Church members and participants, particularly in this context, can easily feel satisfied with simply attending church irregularly, not being connected to its life as a whole and not engaging in its areas of lay ministry to its congregation or the local community. As this spirit grows in the life of a congregation, it hinders the church's growth, vitality, and potential for mission. Martyn Lloyd-Jones describes this as "dead orthodoxy," outlining its characteristic as being content with where they are in their Christian life, "There is no fault to be found with their creed, or with their belief. But there is this element of contentment about it because they not only believe these things but are satisfied with themselves—self-satisfied."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Revival* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1987), 68-69.

Another danger Lloyd-Jones addresses is that of a spiritual inertia in the lives of Christians, a failure to apply the gospel truth to their lives. This can occur when one regularly goes to church, reads the Bible, and even reads other devotional books. Yet it is done with only a sense of duty or to increase their moralistic standing, in their own minds or to others. There is never truly any growth as they have no accountability or community to combat this tendency and, “This is, it seems to me, one of the most terrible dangers in connection with the Christian life as a whole; that we are content with a surface disturbance but never really face it, never really get down to the situation, and to the problem. We never proceed to consider this disturbance, and to say, ‘Well now, what is this, and what can I do about it?’”⁴⁷ Being part of a small group allows the possibility for others to prompt, awake, and stimulate its members past spiritual contentment for further and deeper engagement of their Christian life through this smaller community.

Finally, there are other creative possibilities to communicate the gospel in a local church setting using written mediums. One such opportunity would be for the church to offer written short stories or plays that connect to significant seasons in the church’s life or for a specific sermon series. These written works would be a creative exercise to see the gospel in a different light, setting, or a present day experience that unbelievers or non-attenders might find more relevant, enabling them to connect to the gospel and the life of the church through the experience of storytelling. James K. A. Smith, in his work on Charles Taylor, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, writes, “Taylor considers the central role of art in creating this ‘open space’ that characterizes our secular age. One of the feature of post-Romantic art, he suggests, is a fundamental shift from art

⁴⁷ Ibid., 80-81.

as *mimesis* to art as *poesis*—from art *imitating* nature to art *making* its world.”⁴⁸ These stories or plays would also be unique opportunities to introduce others to the gospel and see the ministry of the church anew as they witness creative perspectives and expressions,

The arts and the aesthetic become a way of working out “the feeling that there is something inadequate in our way of life, that we live by an order which represses what is really important”. The result is an immanent space to try to satisfy a lost longing for transcendence; in short, this creates a “place to go for modern unbelief” without having to settle for the utterly flattened world of mechanism of utilitarianism – but also without having to return to religion proper. And so we get the new sacred spaces of modernity: the concert hall as temple, the museum as chapel; tourism as the new pilgrimage.⁴⁹

Christian communicators and writers have historically used different creative mediums as an effective way to engage and connect with others. C.S. Lewis is one of the most well known in terms of honing his beliefs into fictionalized accounts of different worlds, while keeping the foundational human needs of love, acceptance, and forgiveness at the forefront. For his creative process, focus, and effect, “My thought and talent (such as they are) now flow in a different, though I think not less in Christian channels, and I do not think I am at all likely to write more directly theological pieces. The last work of that sort which I attempted had to be abandoned. If I am good for anything it is for catching the reader unawares—thro’ fiction and symbol.”⁵⁰

Short stories could be a new, unique, and strategic way to accomplish helping a wide variety of people see the gospel in a relevant light upon a new palette. The pastor or communicator, if gifted in writing, could develop a work of fiction that ties a sermon

⁴⁸ James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 74.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

⁵⁰ Phillip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 365.

series or aspect of the gospel to this written work. The short story could be distributed by the church to the congregation in person on Sunday mornings, to church small groups, and on the church's website. This could present an applicable example of the gospel message for people affiliated with the church or be used to highlight a specific liturgical season such as Advent, Lent, Easter, or Pentecost. This method could be effective to reach new and different people who might not otherwise connect to more traditional outreach ministries of the church such as preaching or small groups. These can be tools for apologetics as stories often captivate readers and they see the gospel through the lens of a more compelling medium. Again, C.S. Lewis provides an example for communicators and churches to reach a larger and wider range of people through stories and literature,

His study of literature was integral to his search for common human nature, which was revealed in many guises in differing times and places. So, as he suggested in his sermon "Learning in Wartime," Lewis was like a traveler who had lived in many places. One of the practical implications of that was that his learning shaped his sense of what he had in common with ordinary people who shared in perennial human experience.⁵¹

Although a local church pastor may be able to create a world such as Narnia, pastoral ministry provides remarkable opportunities to witness the stories of people's lives and sense the deepest human longings. Pastors have a wide range of experiences, a broad canvas to work with, and an ability to tell stories in a manner that is palatable, for listeners or readers. Combined together, written storytelling can be an untapped resource for pastors and churches to explore, offering new possibilities for God to work through these channels. James K. A. Smith believes these artistic tools and possibilities can

⁵¹ Marsden, *C.S. Lewis's Mere Christianity: A Biography*, 160-161.

expand unbelief, in essence giving one's unbelief a place to go to and explore, without having to be confined to a fixed, traditional set of norms of belief or faith remaining in a church and unbelief remaining outside of it. Creative mediums in a church can assist in helping one's unbelief move to a place of believing, "So the emergence of art as Art creates room to expand unbelief; unbelief has somewhere to go without settling for the mechanism of a completely flattened universe but also without returning to a traditional religion that is now implausible."⁵²

A written play performed by members within the church or more trained actors outside of it is another way for creative communication to manifest itself within a church body. While the pastor or a person within the church gifted in this artistic field could write the play, it would also be acted out and performed in the church for members, visitors, and the wider community. This gives an opportunity for church members to use theatrical gifts, being engaged and involved in a different way, as well as to attract artist and actors by the means of a new and unique ministry. The performance itself provides an opportunity to invite others, specifically those who may not go to church, or who think of church only as Sunday worship services and the traditional means of Sunday school and small groups. A church performing a play could help them reconsider the ministry of the church as a whole.

There are multiple ways these performances can be used as a tool to help awaken, educate, and inspire people to gospel truths. A play could be set in the present day, using a theme or aspect of Christianity to showcase how one's faith is lived out. Such works would not necessarily have a church as its setting or its actors play Christian roles.

⁵² Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, 76.

Instead, they could be more impactful and transformative by focusing on non-Christians or those who claim no faith at all, to portray how God works in the lives of ordinary women and men in the world. The plays might also have an historical or biblical setting, giving the audience a portrait of what it could have been like for characters in the Bible, making them come alive to the audience. They could be powerfully used during special seasons within the life of church, particularly around Christmas or Easter. These creative works have the potential to be very effective in communicating to Christians and non-believers God's presence and work in the everyday. Therefore, this creative communication can be a means to produce a new starting point for discipleship or apologetics, as people are enthralled with an engaging story performed on stage.

These are means of communicating the gospel in written works that directly or indirectly to a church's preaching and teaching. In order for a church to fully engage and communicate to different people, such means should be explored and attempted. Doing so allows a church to use all its resources of people, gifts, creativity, facilities, and lay leadership to produce diverse mediums for effective, creative gospel communication. Along with the core elements of preaching and teaching, these mediums can assist the overarching mission of a church to meet its goals for effective communication leading to discipleship, apologetics, and evangelism. They do so because they work to create a fictional story out of the factual narrative found in Scripture. Stories move people through emotion and interest, so these stories have the potential to connect and captivate others to the true story a church is trying to share. They push against the traditional methods of articulating this story in preaching or smaller group settings. They can help show a story

that is a better story for how one is go about and walk through the journey of their earthly life.

For those who have been moved and captivated by the different stories communicated in the world, Christians are able to offer this better story, one that is true, “Christian response to such converts to unbelief is not to have an argument about the data or ‘evidences’ but rather to offer an alternative story that offers a more robust, complex understanding of the Christian faith. The goal of such witness would not be the minimal establishment of some vague theism but the invitation to historic, sacramental Christianity.”⁵³ In this manner, the church can use diverse means of communication, even in the form of stories written or acted out, to give a narrative and trajectory of the greater story found in the Bible with the hope that others within and outside the church can discover the story anew and begin to consider it and even question its merits.

⁵³ Ibid., 77.

CHAPTER FOUR

COMMUNICATION FOR APOLOGETICS AND DISCIPLESHIP

The chapter presents how these forms of communication in a local church are able to fulfill the goals of helping individuals within the congregation communicate and witness for further apologetics and evangelism to the world. As the church's communication assists the people of the church in this process and growth, their own discipleship will be cultivated as they learn how to more ably express their faith, connect their personal story to the metanarrative of Scripture, and engage with others in their daily life and spheres of influence. The chapter begins with the necessary emphases of the communication and its intentional, consistent engagement with the entire church congregation. It continues by outlining potential methods and tactics the congregation can adopt for their own gospel communication to others. It concludes by articulating how the communication to the congregation and the people's own communication to others should assist in fostering a stronger discipleship culture for the entire church.

Emphases of Communication and Engagement of Congregation

The goal of communication in a local church should be to foster discipleship and apologetics among the congregation to grow a believer's ability to engage in evangelism by being more able to nimbly state why they believe what they believe, while also contributing to form and engage all people to turn and trust in Jesus Christ for their salvation. Therefore, the communication in preaching, teaching, smaller groups, and written works should ultimately strengthen the Christian believers within the church and help connect non-believers both in and out of the church. While the communication formats can lean towards discipleship, evangelism, or apologetics in its different forms and messages, it ultimately should contribute to each area.

It is possible for the communication within a church to accomplish these ends through an overarching strategy. The initial preaching and teaching ministry can combine discipleship, evangelism, and apologetics while it then moves into equipping classes, smaller group studies, and individual communication through mentoring and one to one personal relationships. While implanting this strategy takes time, careful planning, rigorous focus, and consistent adaptation, it can assist a church to meet its call of fulfilling the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 to, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you."

This overarching plan also provides multiple opportunities for people in the church to be witnesses for evangelism and live into Acts 1:8, as it states, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." It can also assist people

in clarifying their faith so they have greater acumen and ability to give the reasons for their beliefs and meet the goal of 1 Peter 3:15 as it calls us to, “Give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” In these efforts, there must be the realization that,

Apologetics has a place so long as we recognize what it can and cannot do. We engage in apologetics because we take the seekers’ questions seriously—maybe even more seriously than they do. We offer a defense of the faith because we long to intensify the seeker’s hunger for the truth of God. We witness to the truth of the gospel in the hope of that the Spirit will move that person to seek salvation. Yet we do so remembering that no intellectual argument can ever induce conversion. We cannot prove that Christ is the way to God, though we can and should make a case for faith’s validity when we are asked to do so. But only God can quicken the human will that has been deadened by sin; only God can make the scales of unbelief fall so the blind can see.¹

Then through such faith and wisdom, pastors and leaders must, “Teach your congregation to nurture an intimate walk with God. Help them learn how to walk by faith, to pray boldly and to listen to the Spirit. That way your parishioners will be able to not only share the gospel but also the real difference that Christ makes in their lives.”²

Therefore, the congregation is crucial in this endeavor. The strategy cannot succeed if only the church’s pastor, staff, and elders are implementing the plan throughout the life of the church and its people. It is necessary for the individuals of the church body to be receptive to both the overall communication within the church and the overarching strategy. Only then can it be truly effective in impacting the life of the church and its participants. Thus, the design of the communication plan is to be exponential and not linear. The desire for all members to be involved in the teaching and

¹ Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 199.

² *Ibid.*, 239.

participate in either the equipping class or a small group should be communicated throughout the church. In similar communication, the church should invite all who have some form of connection with the church to be involved in the process. This creates an exponential culture, involving, equipping, and engaging as many as possible as the preaching and teaching of God's word moves out to the hearers and the hearers become more fully trained and formed to communicate God's word within their smaller groups, in mentoring and individual relationships, and to others in their spheres of influence at work, home, and leisure activities. If the entire church body adopts and supports this communication strategy, intentionally participating in it, there is a greater chance it can succeed and flourish.

The desire for the communication plan's results are evident as they reside within the congregation itself, as people want and need to be able to give a compelling yet sensitive reason to others for the faith they believe. If the church is to reach others outside its walls and within its own confines, its people need the tools to help them communicate. This can be seen as church members and fellow believers have much interest and curiosity in learning to communicate their faith in a non-threatening manner to those with whom they have relationships and with others whom they encounter.

There is also the need in the culture as a whole for such knowledge and doctrinal capacity, as people have been consistently disenchanted and therefore question the purpose of the larger Church and fundamental tenets of Christianity because they have not heard or received the gospel in a palatable and unthreatening manner. Therefore, communication in a church should help teach others to communicate their faith in ways that personally connect to others in the world and portray why Christianity does indeed

offer good news to all who would listen and consider its claims. C.S. Lewis provides an example as his writing allowed readers to understand the basic assertions of the Christian faith and captivate them with creative stories and explanations. In simplifying his language, Lewis was able to connect with a wider audience. He perfected the art of translation as, “Taking ordinary people seriously as not so ordinary is related to Lewis’s recognition, which he often emphasized, that to be an effective apologist he had to be a ‘translator.’ Translation was one way of reducing the distances among people and finding common ground.”³ Lewis used and offered a tool for communicators, “As he recommended to a correspondent, ‘It only involves first writing down in ordinary theological college English exactly what you want to say and then translating,’ much as though you were turning it into Greek prose. Or, as he put it on another occasion: ‘Any fool can write learned language. The vernacular is the real test.’”⁴

Communication strategy within a church must then encompass and provide, yet in some way redefine, apologetics whereby it becomes a way to encourage one’s own communication to others to connect with them so they can easily understand it. In doing so, this more effective communication of apologetics becomes a means for evangelism. This can occur when both the preachers and communicators think sensitively and critically about what they say and how they say it. In such consideration, one is doing apologetic work, creating and crafting the messages and their overall communication in ways that people from their individual walk of life can understand and appreciate. In so doing, they are thereby engaging in evangelism as they seek to help others more fully

³ Marsden, *C.S. Lewis’s Mere Christianity: A Biography*, 164.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

connect with why they believe as they do. The aspect of apologetics in the overall church communication plan should include ways to teach people how to combine different aspects of the gospel in their overall communication and encourage the listeners how they can do so as well. It is vital for the overall communication plan, within the preaching, equipping class, small groups, and personal devotions to highlight such ways for people to more easily and readily communicate the gospel to others.

Methods and Tactics for the Congregation in Gospel Communication

In order for the church congregation to communicate their faith more effectively, the communication plan should continually highlight various methods and tactics for them to learn and put into practice in their communication and with their relationships. Such tactics must be continually addressed, emphasized, and even shown through teaching, pastoral conversations, and by example. A starting point for the people of the congregation is to show how one can begin such communication by sharing their own personal experience, conversing with others about where they were in their life before they responded to the gospel and how it impacted their life after they received it. Rebecca Manley Pippert encourages and reminds, “We must not forget that one of the most powerful apologetics we have to offer the world is the Spirit’s work in our own lives. It is important to take the time to reflect on how God’s Spirit has been with us at every stage in our pilgrimage, whether in times of suffering and crisis or the times of joy and victory.”⁵

⁵ Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World*, 223.

Individual experiences such as the various stages of a faith journey, discovering one's identity, calling, and facing significant challenges or disruptions can be used as bridges to form gospel connections and relationships among people. This can occur with people from similar backgrounds or age groups, yet also with people of completely different cultural landscapes and ages. Regardless of the diversity of experiences, people are still able to connect and relate to a shared, personal, and individual life story. In a culture that places a high premium on one's individual experience, this is a foundational and transformative starting point to develop deeper conversations and connectivity.

Building such bridges can be very effective to improve both interpersonal and corporate communication within ministry contexts and individual outreach, "Therefore if you have trusted Christ but feel your story is unexciting or inadequate because you were raised in a five-generation Christian home, take heart. Every one of us is absolutely unique. No one could ever duplicate your journey because it is uniquely your own."⁶ One's story is made more effective in communicating their continued obedience in their faith journey as, "Our evangelism will be more vital and substantial, and our efforts will be longer lasting, when we help our skeptical friends see that God is alive and present, that they may discover him by putting his commands into practice and that real conviction that Jesus is God is evidenced not by sentimental feelings about God but by obedience to him."⁷

One's personal testimony and stories can then transition to share how the corporate community of a local church has helped to influence and change their current

⁶ Ibid., 163.

⁷ Ibid., 92.

life. As a constant thread and human need is the desire for community and connection, therefore the testimony of how one discovers a group of people that becomes their spiritual family can be profound and inviting. The narrative trajectory of how one became embraced by a body of believers that did not judge the person upon past actions or their present position of belief, opinions, and current lifestyle, yet encouraged them to participate in the life of the community, and whose gifts became cultivated within this group of similarly broken yet renewed people can break down walls of resistance to exploring and engaging in a church or within one of its smaller group ministries. Such an authentic, accepting community is most important,

Even more than our church evangelism training programs is whether the people in our congregations demonstrate the love of Jesus to those who walk through our doors. Is our church warm and welcoming? Do we practice hospitality and see it as a holy ministry? People today are desperate to connect in some meaningful way to others, yet modern life makes a deep sense of connection and personal integration terribly difficult. Before tracts and techniques, before programs and pamphlets, we need to open our arms wide and let seekers know that they bless us just by being in our midst.⁸

These personal and corporate experiences can act as a bridge and minimize the barriers in communicating what God has done and is doing in the world to help one share their gospel story. One way this can be more fully achieved is relating the story found in Scripture in a simple form of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Even though each person can have a different way of communicating this story to others, the biblical story itself remains the same.

Beginning with creation, communication can address how God is revealed in his creation and how he made it good, as evidenced by the grandeur of natural beauty, or the

⁸ Ibid., 245.

humbling power of witnessing the creative acts of birth and seasonal renewal. Even if some may question God, they may not question the artistry of his handiwork and the revelation of a greater power through a spectacular sunrise, the sweep of the ocean, an endless mountain range, a newborn child, or the colors of autumn. The created world can be a useful beginning to attest to God's ultimate goodness, his providential design for order, and his generosity as the bearer of gifts for all.

The story can then move to the fall as one cannot deny humanity's propensity for conflict and disorder as witnessed in personal relationships, historical tragedy, and present global strife. Everyone can attest to the problems and pain we see and feel, at times all around us, and consider how something is fundamentally wrong with the world we inhabit. All experience this in some form or fashion, be it war, cancer, special needs children, relational damage, corporate theft, racial violence, or natural disaster. Not only are things not as they should be, there is also the constant cry and refrain for justice, for all wrongs to be righted, for an answer to life's struggles, for the needy to be served, for death to be no more, for something to be our rescue.

Studies in Words shows C.S. Lewis making the distinction between the created world that is good and the present age one finds themselves, with the effects and ramifications of sin. In apologetics, it is important to highlight that the world is both created good yet evil is present within it,

We should then have no confusion between (1) the natural universe, which, on the Christian view, must be good, since its Creator pronounced it to be so; (2) the present evil *aion*, under which that universe has long been laboring, and which, as the Christians assert, is to be succeeded by a better *aion*. But powerful forces prevented this. (1) The universe as we know it, the *heimr*, must no doubt be good. True. But the final goal of every human person is the enjoyment of God, not of this *heimr*. Therefore nothing that the *heimr* can offer, not even its most innocent

blessings (daily bread, health, natural affection, or friendship) must be allowed to engage with the whole heart. If it were, we should be treating as our home what was meant to be a wayside inn. Unless we practice detachment, the *heimr* (however good in itself) becomes for us a danger.⁹

In this portion of the biblical story, it is important to understand that the world, the created order, is good. God our Creator created it good and God as our Creator continues to be the giver of good gifts. It's vital to help people see and understand this biblical fact. These good gifts can include friendship, family, children, marriage, sex, singleness, nature, personal talents or abilities of mind and body, food, home, and the Church itself. However, all too often we mistake the created for the Creator and place our faith, reliance, and primary love on the gifts given to us. This tendency is a result of the fall, leading humanity to make idols of the gifts given to us. There must be a practice of detachment where we balance in a healthy manner the good gifts given with a love to the giver of those gifts. At present, through the work of Jesus Christ, the world has now begun moving towards the new heavens and the new earth, an eternal age where all will be good. One can then share,

Why is the gospel called good news? Because the story of Christ addresses how God entered human history through Christ, who took upon himself the sin of the human race so that all who believe might be saved from the judgment we rightly deserve. Our message is that Jesus lived, died and rose again for our sin! We are to repent, believe and receive Christ as King. We are to follow Jesus as Lord of our lives and to live under his rule. Everything about us, every aspect of our being—physical, social, psychological, intellectual, material—is to be lived for God's glory. Our new purpose is to live in partnership with God, whose desire, as Jesus taught in his prayer, is for his kingdom to reign, “on earth as it is in heaven.” (Mt. 6:10).¹⁰

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 2013), 230. Emphasis original.

¹⁰ Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World*, 157.

God's ongoing restorative work is now also part of the story, both for individuals and the world we live. It began with Jesus Christ's bodily resurrection and continues as God is restoring the world through renewed hearts and lives by the means of the Holy Spirit and his global Church. God's restorative work continues as he promises to restore the bodies of believers to a physical resurrection and to restore the entire created order in the new heavens and the new earth. Until that occurs, believers can know the sin and death we witness and experience currently have been defeated eternally. Believers are to live and walk in this hope with a renewed purpose of helping others receive it. C.S. Lewis describes this new world and coming kingdom God,

The whole tenor of the New Testament implies that the life of the new *aion* will be immortal. But, except in parables, there seems to be very little suggestion of any realm of the dead to which all souls at all times have passed in virtue of their intrinsic indestructibility. If they believed in any such Hades, the first Christians seem, as Christians, to take no interest in it. What gives entry into the new *aion* is not natural immortality but miraculous resurrection (Luke 20:35). The fact that such resurrection will occur and that men will thus enter such a life is one of the novelties of the new *aion*.¹¹

As this story in its entirety of God's good creation, humanity's fall, Christ's redemption, and its ultimate restoration is cultivated and manifested in a person's life, they personalize it more for themselves and their listeners through experiences God has allowed to shape them. They apply this biblical story to their own story, and use aspects of it to build bridges of connection and influence with others. This takes intentional listening, sensitivity, study, and prayer, yet it becomes effective for personal witness through the communication of preaching and teaching to others through individual relationships. In this process, one must always, "Pay attention to the story of the seeker.

¹¹ Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 235. Emphasis original.

We won't be able to make God's story relevant unless we understand his or her story first. It's always important to be sensitive to the needs of hurt people. But in a postmodern, experience-oriented culture like ours, being able to discern a person's needs is a vital skill if we are to help them see their need for Christ."¹² Only through such sensitivity and listening can one discern that, "Sometimes God will lead us to share the biblical narrative and then our personal story. Other times we begin with a personal story that leads into sharing some aspect of God's story. However God guides us, it is the combination of the two that helps seekers."¹³ Through this unique combination of God's story, our story, and their story is an effective means of apologetics.

Communication for Discipleship

As the church's communication grows evangelism and apologetics in believer's lives, it is also fruitful for discipleship. All church communication should help its people become more fully formed as disciples. Therefore, as one hears the gospel, learns its attributes, and it takes hold of a person's life, there should be visible results for the person in community. The effect of this communication moves people into smaller groups for further discussion and closer relational bonds while helping them form individual mentoring relationships. This gospel saturated growth through the church should also inspire and lead them to witness as they go about their daily lives in simple communication of what God is doing in them with those whom they work, their families, and friends.

¹² Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World*, 213.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 219.

A church's communication toward discipleship should be oriented around three component parts: discipleship in the preaching, discipleship in the smaller groups, and discipleship to the individuals in all areas of their life. In many churches, it becomes easy to have one or two of these aspects yet not all three. When gospel communication in a church is most effective, all three need to be addressed to help church members grow into discipleship.

First, discipleship must be communicated from the preaching and teaching in a church. This occurs by encouraging church members they can be disciples; in fact, they often already are. Many people connected to a church simply attend, even irregularly, yet do not believe they are able to be a disciple. These participants may not feel they don't possess enough biblical knowledge, leadership capacity, or personal influence to be what they deem needed as a disciple. The church's communicator or preacher can correct such misunderstanding by highlighting how anyone can be a disciple or leader for Christ because God is able to use anyone. The preacher can readily point to Jesus' first 12 followers, who were initially viewed as unworthy in the world's eyes, yet became transformed as they walked with Jesus. The communicator has multiple examples of others throughout the Bible who were first found lacking, yet ultimately used in great ways. From Abraham to Joseph, Rahab to Ruth, Moses to Elijah, David to Jonah, these flawed individuals responded to God, followed him in faith, and were used to help others come to know him. Paul initially persecuted the early Church only to become its greatest missionary and wrote much of the New Testament. The consistent message communicated throughout the church body is God can use anyone to be a disciple.

The overall communication from the pulpit should move people to discipleship by understanding the importance of being part of a smaller group of believers for biblical study, personal support, and communal growth. Smaller groups greatly aid individuals in their ability to express the gospel by hearing it, reading it, questioning it, and sharing it. Through these groups, personal connections are formed that can lead to stronger relationships for individual mentoring. Small groups are instrumental launching points for a church to grow a mentoring culture, providing opportunities for many of its congregation to engage in active discipleship.

These groups are necessary for a church body to grow a healthy culture of effective and multi-layered gospel communication and discipleship. Within these groups leaders are raised, mentors are formed, and a safe space is cultivated for intentional weekly discipleship. In them, “We work out our faith with these broken men and women around us in the pews. It’s lackluster. It can be boring or taxing. It’s often messy. It’s sometimes painful. But these Christians around me become each other’s call and response. We remind each other of the good news. All saints and sinners in the church share together in the gospel.”¹⁴

Being together in this way awakens and reminds people of two important aspects of the Christian faith. The first shows them, “while an individual relationship with Jesus is an important part of the Christian life, it is not the sum total of the Christian life. Our relationship with God is never less than an intimate relationship with Christ, but it is always more than that. Christians throughout—Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox alike—

¹⁴ Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in the Everyday Life*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 126.

have confessed that it is impossible to have a relationship with Christ outside of a vital relationship with the Church, Christ's body and bride."¹⁵ In addition, one sees,

When we worship Jesus, we rely on millions of Christians over thousands of years whom God has used to bear witness to himself. The only reason we know anything at all about Jesus is because his disciples told their friends, neighbors, and enemies about him, the apostles preached and wrote down his teaching and stories about him, and believers have carried his message everywhere they've gone in each generation. The Bible names this process *paradosis*—the faithful handing down of the gospel, a process that is always embodied and that happens in real time with real people.¹⁶

Small groups are also an effective and meaningful way to grow relationships across racial, economic, and cultural lines. As a church grows more diverse, it must work to combat this diversity growing into individual groups that are similar in cultural makeup. Efforts must be made for groups to be diverse and not for the same types of people form their own comfortable group of like-minded believers. This will contribute greatly to the people of the church learning, living, and leading across diverse cultural lines. Christena Cleveland writes that,

People can meet God within their cultural context but in order to follow God, they must cross into other cultures because that's what Jesus did in the incarnation and on the cross. Discipleship is crosscultural. When we meet Jesus around people who are just like us and then continue to follow Jesus with people who are just like us, we stifle our growth in Christ and open ourselves up to a world of division. However, when we're rubbing elbows Christian fellowship with people who are different from us, we can learn from each other and grow more like Christ. Like iron sharpens iron.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., 118.

¹⁶ Ibid., 119. Emphasis original.

¹⁷ Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 21.

Intentional cultivation of diverse groups can help churches achieve an authentic degree of discipleship across racial and cultural lines. Yet it does not simply happen on its own. For this to occur, “Pastors and leaders who wish to lead their groups into crosscultural partnerships must lay a sturdy foundation that will likely require multiple weeks of teaching, conversation, and application that emphasize the importance of crosscultural unity.”¹⁸ This can be accomplished with further teaching and preaching from the pulpit about the need for diversity amongst relationships in groups and its fruit of formative discipleship, “Pastors and church leaders must lead by defining and communicating norms in their church groups that clearly support crosscultural unity and encourage group members to bravely venture outside their cultural comfort zones in pursuit of unity.”¹⁹

Finally, discipleship should be encouraged and redefined to be outside the walls of the church body and into the world. All church communication should stress that we need to gather as a corporate body of believers, yet also scatter to a world in need of seeing and hearing real life examples from Christ followers. Such individual discipleship can be redefined in communicating to people this scattering does not mean explicit or formal presentations of the gospel to outsiders or non-believers, but readily occurs through their life as they interact with friends, family members, and those whom they work as, “The Kingdom of God comes both through our gathered worship each week and our ‘scattered’ worship in our work each day. Thus all work, even a simple, small task, matters eternally.”²⁰ This simplifies a person’s call to discipleship as they take part in the

¹⁸ Ibid., 159.

¹⁹ Ibid., 174.

²⁰ Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life*, 92.

church's corporate life of worship and smaller groups, then go to others in their spheres of influence to serve, love, listen, and share what the gospel has done in them. As individuals live this way, they witness the gospel reality of being fully engaged in the world, with a maturity that they are not fully of it because they have been made new by the gospel.

This provides individuals with newfound freedom, a serene confidence to serve and share as they take more time to listen to and love their neighbor. Such a manner of relating to the world connects to Romans 13:8-10 as it clarifies, "Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet, and any other commandment, are summed up by this commandment: love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law." In this way, discipleship is made palatable as believers communicate with words and actions as they go to their world as Jesus' Church. This Christ-like love connects discipleship to apologetics because, "When our lives are characterized by the love of Christ, we can begin to interest people in the gospel. It bears repeating: if we are going to arouse seekers' curiosity in Jesus, then we must demonstrate the love of Jesus. One of the challenges in learning how to love people is seeing beyond their emotional baggage and into their hearts."²¹

This love is a fruit of effective gospel communication and it is often lost within churches. John Perkins argues, "Preachers work so hard to get their doctrine right, and

²¹ Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World*, 65.

then they try to think of clever ways to get their congregations to sit and listen to their good theology. I ask them, ‘How are you helping your church to love?’ And they tell me, ‘Well, if they’re Christians they will love.’ But I’ve met a lot of Christians who don’t know what love means.”²² Love then, is not only a feeling; it is an action that requires a true conversion. To love in this way, they must first realize, “Jesus came down from heaven and gave his life to show how much God loves each one of us. Even while we were his enemies, Christ, died for us. That’s the greatest love you’ll ever know, and it has the power to transform both our lives and our society.”²³ Frederick Douglass, whose prophetic communication led to both apologetics and discipleship in proclaiming the justice and reconciliation of God, professed, “At the center of true Christianity was love—a love of God that led to a fervent love of one’s neighbor, slave and free alike.”²⁴

In these areas, a picture of effective communication in a local church is given for apologetics, evangelism, and discipleship of its congregation. Although these goals and their results are clearly stated, they can be extremely challenging to implement in a church and live out by its people. Therefore, a church needs a specific, comprehensive plan to help the pastors, elders, staff, and lay leaders equip the entire church body to do so. The next chapter presents this intentional, specific plan for Bellwether Church.

²² Marsh and Perkins, *Welcoming Justice*, 41.

²³ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁴ Dilbeck, *Frederick Douglass: America’s Prophet*, 85.

PART THREE
MINISTRY STRATEGY

CHAPTER FIVE

PLANS AND GOALS FOR OVERARCHING COMMUNICAITON PROGRAM

This chapter presents the ministry strategy, structure, and logistical steps of an overarching communication program for the congregation of Bellwether Church. This program includes Sunday morning sermons, a midweek equipping study, small group curriculums, writing for church-wide devotions, and creative plays for special liturgical seasons within the church's calendar year. Content for the communication program is presented, beginning with the Sunday sermon series over a specific course of time and moves into other forms of communication within small groups and individual discipleship. Goals of the planned communication program are then stated for the entire congregation within this given time period.

Overview of Communication Program at Bellwether Church

This communication program begins with its timeframe of two years, from January 2020 until January 2022. This allows sufficient time to implement the program, as it will take time for the program to be initially communicated, leaders to be trained, curriculum to be established, and the culture of the program embedded in the life of the church. It also takes time for the communication itself to cover different aspects of the

gospel as a whole. The people of Bellwether Church will need time for it to percolate and become acclimated in the overall church and mission. The congregation will have ample opportunities to be comfortable and affiliated with the program through Sunday services, small groups, and in their individual lives. This time allows the program to nurture within the life of the church before it formally commences, thus being more effective in its duration. January is an optimal time to begin because many are eager to make new decisions and start new habits. The church would thus begin the program in January 2020 and it would end over the Advent season in December of 2021. After it is underway for one year, January of 2021 is a time to evaluate the program's success to that point and make any changes to modify the communication program for the coming year.

The starting point for the communication program would be the sermons in the Sunday worship service. This is where the most people will have the opportunity to hear the gospel, from the church's members, to its regular attenders, and its visitors. In the Sunday sermons there will be an ongoing presentation of the gospel, encouragement to participate in smaller groups, and teaching to equip people as to how to practically live out the gospel in their daily life. George Whitefield remains an example in gospel preaching to many diverse listeners. For him, "It was not the so-called 'Social Gospel' but the Gospel of redeeming grace—the only Gospel—that wrought the great change two hundred years ago. In the knowledge of the power of the Gospel Whitefield went with confidence to the semi-heathen Kingswood colliers or the equally godless aristocracy and to all other classes of mankind and witnessed the transformation of lives among all."¹ In

¹ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the 18th Century Revival Volume 2* (East Peoria, IL: Versa Press, Inc., 2009), 536

preaching, the fullness of the gospel should be presented and made plain, even if challenging to hearers. This is not, “The partial Gospel which characterizes so much of to-day’s evangelicalism, but the whole Gospel that declares the majesty and holiness of God, the utter helplessness of man, the necessity of repentance, and a salvation that is manifested, not in a mere profession, but in the miracle of a new life.”²

Even if one does not participate in smaller groups, church ministries to children or students, local or global missions, or individual mentoring, the preaching in Sunday worship services are opportunities to hear the gospel and respond in faith. It’s possible for proclamation within preaching to be neglected, or believed to an outdated skill, yet Whitefield reminds communicators what true preaching is always to be, “True preaching is not a discussion, but a proclamation; not dialogue, but the asserting of ‘Thus saith the Lord!’ True preaching should arise from a broken heart, should be alive with a mighty and compelling urgency, and should overflow with compassion.”³

Thus the communication program will emphasize the gospel presentation in the preaching of Sunday worship services to be primary and continually given much thought, study, reflection, and prayer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a model shown by Eric Metaxas in *Bonhoeffer Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. Preaching was a holy, sacred event, “Like prayer or meditation on a scriptural text, it was an opportunity to hear from heaven, and for the preacher, it was a holy privilege to be the vessel through whom God would speak. Like the incarnation, it was a place of revelation, where Christ came into this world from

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 536-537.

outside it.”⁴ This will be the undergirding philosophy of preaching throughout the church’s program.

After the preaching in Sunday worship services, the next primary means of implementation will be the midweek study for the congregation, focused on equipping believers and intentional discipleship. This midweek study will place emphasis upon teaching, discussion, and growing relationships amongst participants. It will be held in a church multipurpose room, with tables so participants can engage with the teaching, asking questions and sparring conversation, both with the teacher and one another. This equipping class will serve as a bridge and a continuum of the Sunday morning sermon. It allows people to process and engage further what they heard on Sunday morning as they digest and reflect on the sermon’s subject matter in a thorough, robust manner.

An example of such a class, led by the pastor for members of the congregation to engage in discussion and shared testimonies is found in the ministry of Charles Spurgeon. As a pastor, he offered weekly opportunities for people to engage in conversation with him about his most recent sermons and their continued, formative Christian growth. Arnold Dallimore shows how such a time was instrumental to his ministry, connecting his preaching to discipleship. Spurgeon did not rely solely upon his preaching gift, he took time weekly to meet with individuals to minister to them and intentionally disciple them, “During his first years in London he made himself available every Tuesday afternoon, that persons who were in trouble about their souls might seek his advice, or those who had recently come to know Christ might tell him of their experience. These

⁴ Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 272.

were glorious occasions to him, and he rejoiced to point a seeking one to the Lord or to hear a testimony of the transformation of a life.”⁵

While this class will offer space to talk through additional various points of the gospel, apologetics, and individual discipleship, it will be a formative opportunity for the teacher to practically shape those who attend and merge this teaching with Sunday messages. Regardless of the sermon series, there will be foundational principles the class will address about what it means to live as a Christian. J.I. Packer gives a thorough example of these principles in *Knowing God*. Such principles will be highlighted throughout this study for church members and participants,

1 God has spoken to man, and the Bible is His Word, given to us to make us wise unto salvation. 2 God is Lord and King over His world; He rules all things for His own glory, displaying His perfections in all that He does, in order that men and angels may worship and adore Him. 3 God is Saviour, active in sovereign love through the Lord Jesus Christ to rescue believers from the guilt and power of sin, to adopt them as His sons, and to bless them accordingly. 4 God is Triune; there are within the Godhead three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and the work of salvation is one in which all three act together, the Father purposing redemption, the Son securing it, and the Spirit applying it. 5 Godliness means responding to God’s revelation in trust and obedience, faith and worship, prayer and praise, submission and service. Life must be seen and lived in the light of God’s Word. This, and nothing else, is true religion.⁶

In addition to the midweek class, there will be opportunities for people to engage in smaller groups led by leaders within the church. These groups are essential in order to connect a majority of people in the church to the program, particularly as many would not be able nor may not prefer to attend the midweek study. These groups would meet weekly at diverse times, from mornings before people go to work, during lunch hours,

⁵ Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography* (East Peoria, IL: Versa Press, Inc. 2009), 80.

⁶ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 15-16.

and in the evening at the church or in the more relaxed setting of a home. Such regular gatherings can be, “A tribute to the power of socialization and the necessity of a truthful, loving group for the nurturing of true individuality. In our better moments, the church has always known this.”⁷

The format for the groups would include teaching by the leaders, yet the priorities of the small group culture would emphasize conversation, ongoing dialogue on topics addressed, and intentional interaction with the entire group. Group leaders would be provided with a curriculum of the communication plan for the small group to become familiarized with the program, strategy, and goals over the given time period. With this knowledge, acclimation, and consistent training throughout the course of the program, the leaders can connect the group study to the current Sunday messages while making it more applicable for the group as a whole. This provides a larger canvas for more people in the church to engage with the program, while the groups can more readily cultivate spaces for healthy conversation about aspects of the gospel, allowing people to openly share about their beliefs, past religious background, and questions on topics addressed. This time produces a forum and community for participants to grow together and for the church to grow in its outreach and discipleship through the various small groups.

Small group ministries are instrumental for the communication plan to be robust, fluid, and diverse as well as for the church to live out its mission as the people of God, sharing life together in different relationships and further community. Groups are a critical way for the congregation to see and grow the love of Christ, both for one another and to the outside world as they offer an open door to invite people who may not choose

⁷ Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*, 44.

to attend a Sunday morning service. This can help them see the life of a church in a renewed way and offer a different vision of the larger church body. It expands the overall communion of the church into a smaller community so that the church itself becomes an embodiment of expanding communion. This quality, of the church doing life together, matters greatly to its overall integrity of gospel witness. As this occurs, the church becomes what it is meant to be—a fellowship of the Holy Spirit. In this larger communion, the church becomes an example difficult to deny, its beliefs and doctrines are made real when people, “enact the truth of the gospel through racial reconciliation, familial forgiveness, social justice, and sacrificial love. It is difficult to contradict the ministry of reconciliation. The church cannot compel the world to taste and see the goodness of God. It is nevertheless responsible to communicate both the sense and the sweetness of what is in Christ.”⁸ These groups can grow such smaller communities and contribute to the communal life of the church as a whole by doing life together and being a powerful witness to those within it and others outside they invite to participate.

Written devotions for the church body will be connected to the communication program and distributed regularly among the congregation. These devotions will use the Sunday sermons as the starting point, tying explicitly to the message, yet attempting to offer a unique, diverse viewpoint on it, with additional Scripture and questions for the reader to consider. They can also be used as a medium to connect people to the Wednesday midweek equipping study or any of the church’s small groups with contacts and brief descriptions of each group. Devotions have the goal to instigate curiosity in the

⁸ Kevin Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 175.

sermon messages and the overall communication program while emphasizing the smaller groups and encouraging people to become more involved more in the church's life.

Therefore, devotions will be both biblical and practical as they address Scripture used in current messages and practical in nurturing more involvement in church activities. These written devotions will be useful to the overall communication program as guides, supplements, and personal studies. They will be distributed during Sunday services and made available on the church's website and social media for greater outreach and increased connectivity.

An example of a pastor using this model of written mediums is Charles Spurgeon, a prolific writer of monthly publications and daily devotions for his congregation.

Spurgeon wrote a magazine each month containing much content for spiritual growth and personal discipleship,

While the sermons came out singly each week and in volume form each year, Spurgeon also produced his magazine, *The Sword and the Trowel*, each month. It contained news of the religious world in general, with his comments upon it, but especially of the Tabernacle and its associated organizations. There were also biblical expositions and warm spiritual articles and exhortations to Christian zeal. One of its most remarkable features was the series of book reviews. These were virtually all written by Spurgeon himself, and they manifest something of the vast extent of his reading and of his ability to express an all-covering opinion in a few words.⁹

Spurgeon also crafted daily devotions for his congregation to use for their personal study and understanding. These were, "*Morning by Morning and Evening by Evening*, devotional readings with which to begin and close the day. These two little volumes are

⁹ Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 195.

characterized by Spurgeon's rare ability to put deep truths into simple language and to do so in a rich, warm, spiritual tone."¹⁰

Another example of Christian writing for a wide audience is Hannah More in the nineteenth century. Karen Swallow Prior shows she consistently wrote poetry, plays, short stories, and tracts because, "Expanding the moral imagination through words was her life's work."¹¹ One of her primary reasons behind her writings was to raise the levels of the habits and principles of the common people in this time. She believed, "More than ideas, imagination moved the world."¹² Her tracts were written for the general public, with the intent they, "could reach an otherwise unreached audience with lessons in religion, thrift, and morality."¹³ These tracts were used to help people have a greater understanding of God's plan with some people were even converting to Christianity through them.¹⁴ These can be seen as effective tools for the communication of Christian principles to connect with people who might not otherwise attend a church.

Finally, plays will be written, performed, and offered for the congregation and larger local community. Hannah More's example and work is an example of a Christian playwright who, "recognized the power of dramatic literature and was drawn to employing that influence toward didactic ends."¹⁵ She believed the theatre and literary

¹⁰ Ibid., 196.

¹¹ Karen Swallow Prior, *Fierce Convictions: The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More: Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2014), xviii.

¹² Ibid., 221.

¹³ Ibid., 222.

¹⁴ Ibid., 225.

¹⁵ Ibid., 97.

works were able to balance emotion and reason when often people tended to lean towards one or the others. They could enliven a flame that warms the human heart as, “Such a flame was needed to meld relationships together, whether with one’s fellow man or with God.”¹⁶ She hoped more poets, writers, and painters would bring the Bible back into fashion with the people even if they were fearful of its doctrines.¹⁷ Theatrical works remain a possibility for people to receive the warmth of emotion and a new vision for biblical themes and even hidden doctrines within the fictional narrative.

These plays will implicitly connect to the overall communication program as they use themes or topics addressed in the Sunday messages, yet placing these ideas in historical or fictional frameworks to be performed on stage at the church. Examples of their topics and storylines can be finding one’s identity outside of work and career, recognizing the idols of family and marriage, reconciliation amongst enemies, discovering true community, and receiving redemption in the gospel. There will be at least four plays during the program’s timeframe. The first will be on Easter weekend of 2020, the second on Christmas of 2020, the third during the Lenten season of 2021, and the last in the Advent season of 2021. The subject of the plays can also revolve around these seasons while connecting to topics addressed during the Sunday morning series. The plays will be opportunities to see the themes of message and sermon series lived out in a practical, engaging, and entertaining way. There is the possibility and hope that such performances will impact people in a unique ways as they see the gospel presented in a more creative format.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 98.

Content of the Communication Program

The content of the overall communication program will be designed to assist the congregation as well as those outside of it who enter into the life of the church in its given time period to more ably define and articulate the gospel. Communication in Sunday preaching, weekly teaching studies, small groups, written works, and creative mediums will place priority on being clear to share the gospel. The forms will articulate it repeatedly so it can be honed into the mind, heart, and life of the people. The congregation will have multiple offerings to hear it, read it, and see it, with forums to think on it, dwell upon it, and allow it to penetrate into their lives.

All the methods of the communication program must strive to articulate the gospel to the hearers and readers in a compelling way. Within church leadership and the chosen communication team, the teachers, preachers, writers, and small group leaders should give time to think and work to articulate the gospel in ways that connect to current life situations of the congregation. Efforts should be made to consider avenues that draw listeners in in order to engage their hearts and minds. George Whitefield remains a model in bridging theological acumen with captivating communication,

Whitefield was utterly certain about the Christian gospel, the delights of divine grace, and the horrors of divine judgment: these truths understandably elicited strong feelings. But his emotions also flowed from his conviction that true religion—and excellent public speaking—engaged the heart, not just the head. You could go to any number of parishes in England and hear dry recitations of traditional doctrine. His background in the theater, the dramatic setting of the field sermon, and the freedom of the extemporaneous mode helped the young preacher shake people out of complacency.¹⁸

¹⁸ Kidd, *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father*, 65.

Communication aims are to be clear, creative, and compelling to achieve the best possible engagement of as many people in the church as possible. Creative thought and ingenuity are necessary to combine biblical gospel truths with current perceived needs within the lives of individuals and the church community.

This can begin by defining and articulating a biblical worldview of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. This worldview needs to be shared and addressed as a whole yet also broken down into its individual parts. It is vital to help people see and grasp this biblical worldview, providing new or further understanding to how it reveals itself in history and the present. Creative communication of a biblical worldview can assist people to see themselves in, “a completely different social imagery that was open to transcendence and articulated a telos for human flourishing.”¹⁹

Already addressed in this paper, the program will stress the biblical worldview consistently to help others see its overarching narrative and place the gospel within its context. The church’s overall communication design is intended to help people learn and know more about God as creator, how humanity and the created order are fallen, Jesus Christ being our redeemer, and the Holy Spirit in the global Church as the primary restoring instrument for individuals and the world. This can move people, “In ways that they never could have anticipated, some will begin to wonder if ‘renunciation’ isn’t the way to wholeness, and that freedom might be found in the gift of constraint, and that the strange rituals of Christian worship are the answer to their most human aspirations.”²⁰

¹⁹ Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, 134.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

The communication plan will highlight this overall biblical worldview in all of its aspects, from Sunday sermons, to equipping classes, small groups, and written works of devotion. The primary means, however, will continually be the Sunday sermons as the plan will be formed and shaped around seven sermon series of 12 weeks each over the course of 84 Sunday worship services. This plan and timetable will allow for an additional 20 Sunday services and messages for further flexibility if a series should go longer or if the overall plan needs to be adjusted for further material. The sermon series during the time period of the communication plan will highlight different themes of the biblical worldview as well as connecting them to specific seasons in the church's life.

The Sunday morning sermon series will intersperse series in books of the Bible along with a complimentary series on a gospel theme. An initial example of the entire communication plan provided below gives a sense of the overall trajectory of the program, incorporating a biblical worldview, and the various topics of the sermon series. While the series that highlight different books of the Bible will take the congregation through the majority of the Scripture in the order it was written, the complimentary series will be more topical in nature, yet connect highly to the biblical series preached before it. By combining series on books of the Bible with supplemented topical series, the plan can more readily connect the story of Scripture to the present, everyday lives of the congregation as, "Preaching will want to name the congregation's specific, everyday living as part of a cosmic drama that God is writing. We are on a journey. We are at sea. Baptismal preaching will not leave us just as we are."²¹

²¹ Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*, 47.

The initial series will be based in the book of Genesis with the focus on God's creation, humanity's fall and the beginning of God's redemption plan. The second series will compliment the series on Genesis by focusing on the topic of *Imago Dei* and how all people are created in the image of God and what they can mean for our lives. The third series will take the church through the Gospel of Luke and focus on God's plan of redemption being fulfilled and accomplished in Jesus Christ. The fourth series will build a bridge from the Luke series to the theme of discipleship. The fifth series will be on the book of Acts to show the early follower of Christ responding to the redemptive work, the birth of the Church, and the beginning restorative work of the Holy Spirit. The sixth series highly connect to the previous series in Acts by focusing on the mission of the Church to neighbors and nations. The seventh series will conclude the communication program in the book of Revelation with a focus on God's ultimate restoration and consummation of the created order in the new heavens and new earth.

The midweek class will then connect to the Sunday morning preaching series, yet go further to be more explicitly focused on how one can live out a biblical worldview as seen in Scripture through apologetics and discipleship in the present time and within the local church community. It will be more intentional in equipping, encouraging, and discussing how anyone is able to engage in apologetics and grow as a disciple by providing possible tools and disciplines for its participants. This study will attempt to make the communication from the sermons, and within the class itself, become even more personal and applicable where participants think through different gospel aspects in their daily lives and relationships. Questions can be more readily posed in this environment, with honest conversation cultivated, about the challenges of living out a

biblical worldview. The class therefore is designed to be more personal, with in–depth training in discipleship and apologetics, for the members and attendees of the church body.

While it is possible and encouraged for people in the church to be part of both the midweek study and a small group, the entire church body will be encouraged participate in a small group. There is much rationale for the church to continuously promote small groups and for its people to engage in them. These small groups will offer more opportunities for leaders to be formed who will teach and facilitate this biblical worldview within the church body. Small group leaders will grow in their own capacity to present and articulate the gospel and have fruitful conversation around apologetics and discipleship. The small groups themselves will also provide spaces for individuals to begin growing closer relationships with one another and a greater sense of community can arise within these groups than even the midweek study. The people within the smaller groups will have multiple opportunities to intentionally connect with others in group in a deeper, more meaningful way, while often being challenged in a healthy way through the group’s teaching or by close relationships within the group.

Finally, through the overall communication plan, as it establishes itself amongst the people of the church and moves into the small groups, individual mentoring opportunities will be discovered as such a mentoring culture becomes emphasized and encouraged to develop for the church body. One way this can potentially begin is with the leaders of different small groups taking on the role of a mentor to someone else within the group. In a mentoring relationship, the personal, individual communication of the gospel can be very effective as it is taught by a person who has gained the trust with the

one he or she is mentors. This highlights a consistent biblical truth of evangelism that one way the gospel can best be taught, explained, and explored is on a one to one, personal level.

Therefore, the church will begin to consistently promote and encourage these mentoring relationships throughout the program's timeframe with people who connect with one another or who have similar shared life experiences. Not only can small group leaders become mentors, other members of the church or the members within a small group can mentor one another and be encouraged to mentor someone outside the church. Ultimately, in order to receive training and greater biblical knowledge, the people who would become potential mentors within the communication program would also attend the midweek study led by the church's pastor and elder team. This would help the potential mentor grow in their ability to mentor others as they navigate different life challenges and theological questions they would confront while serving as a mentor to someone in the church body. It would also contribute to the overall health and alignment of the person who seeks to begin a mentoring relationship and allow them a place to ask questions and receive feedback as issues arise while they help mentor an individual.

These mentoring relationships can also greatly assist in growing a church's cultural and racial diversity. This can happen when people of different races within a church mentor someone of a different race or cultural background. Curtiss Paul DeYoung writes, "Whites need to be mentored for leadership by persons of color."²² This follows the example of the early Church as, "Paul mentored Gentiles side by side with Jews,

²² Allan Aubrey Boesak, and Curtiss Paul DeYoung. *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 89.

training them as though they were Jews. Whites desiring to provide leadership in diverse congregations need to be mentored by leaders of color side by side with African Americans, Native Americans, Asians, Latinas/os, Africans, Arabs, etc. as though they were persons of color.”²³

Goals for the Congregation Within this Communication Program

There are several ultimate goals for the congregation through this communication program that can be attainable in its given time period. The program will identify and stress five realistic goals for the congregation it seeks to achieve. These goals will be highlighted continually throughout its timeframe and periods of assessment will be planned to consistently apprise whether the program is succeeding in moving the people of Bellwether Church towards these goals.

The first goal is for people to understand the gospel more fully in order to see Christianity as a whole and their personal faith as life and an adventure within both a corporate body and a global Church. This happens individually as, “There are plenty of doctrines in the world and plenty of disciples for various causes. What makes Christian doctrine unique, however, is its single-minded and single-hearted focus on knowing God and oneself in Jesus Christ and in directing disciples to demonstrate their understanding of this ultimate reality.”²⁴ Yet understanding the gospel in its fullness does not allow an individual to remain isolated. They are to participate and share in both a local community and realize they are part of the global Church family as, “The church is the public

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine*, 9.

revelation of the mystery of salvation. Doctrine exists to aid the church and disciples, not to withdraw from the world into their own enclave but rather to *get real*. Public theology in the sense I am using the term is all about getting real: displaying the real *in Christ*.”²⁵

This goal is extremely relevant for the church’s cultural context in Jackson. Within this culture, many see Christianity, personal faith, and their overall church experience as only something they do or are supposed to do and not shaping who they are to be in all of life, their careers, and their relationships. One’s Christian faith can be primarily viewed through the lens of going to church when they are able to attend, as long as it doesn’t conflict with other priorities of kids’ activities and social engagements. It becomes a potential addition that might make their life better, rather than it encompassing all of life, resulting in sacrificial love with an approach of mission and purpose to others in their spheres of influence. If one’s approach is only to come and be part of a church in order to receive personal help or gratification, then they are only infants at best in their Christian faith.²⁶ If these goals continue to be their primary focus, then they will see the attributes of discipleship, Bible study, serving at their church, being part of a small group, and their occasional involvement in a mission project or global trip, more as a duty instead of a desired beauty they move and grow into. The reality and result then becomes that they are not envisioning their faith as all encompassing and ultimately defining who they are as a human being. The challenge is to present the gospel in a compelling way so they begin to view it as life giving, with their entire journey in this world as an adventure, that ultimately is for God’s glory and their own good.

²⁵ Ibid. Emphasis original.

²⁶ Lloyd-Jones, *Revival*, 8.

This can be achieved as people hear the gospel news of God creating each person in His own image, yet indwelling sin remains, and Jesus Christ being our rescuer and restorer. Thus, they can begin to see their life is not accidental, nor are there any accidents in Christianity. God knew and chose the time and place for each person to live, gave each individual gifts to be used, and is always present, compelling us outward to use these gifts to serve the world's needs. A person can then begin to see God's hand, plan, and design in their life. Even if this plan is not abundantly clear, nor if it does not become immediately evident, they know his plan is being carried out, as they see and realize in the story of Scripture, and they've been given a unique opportunity to play a role in God's great drama and adventure of the world's ultimate restoration. William Willimon writes of the early Church in the Roman Empire, prior to Constantine, "Christians found themselves caught up in a grand drama of God's salvation of all creation. Salvation was cosmic, a victory that God was achieving in Christ throughout all creation, a restoration not just of an individual life, but of the whole world to himself. Discipleship was a great cosmic adventure, not an individual story."²⁷

This leads to the second goal that people would desire to know more of the biblical text and process it both on their own in daily study and together with others in the church, whether through individual mentoring or their involvement in a church small group. When people become awakened by the gospel and begin to see God's story in history, they should desire to know it more as they begin to see the Bible anew. This renewed vision helps them understand Scripture not only as a set of rules, guidelines, or

²⁷ Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*, 105.

principles, but as provided for us to read, meditate upon, and memorize, thereby understanding more of God's plan that is both cosmic and personal in scope. The people can begin to see the Bible more as Dietrich Bonhoeffer views it, "One cannot simply *read* the Bible, like other books. One must be prepared really to enquire of it. Only thus will it reveal itself. Only if we expect from it the ultimate answer, shall we receive it. That is because in the Bible God speaks to us. And one cannot simply think about God in one's own strength, one has to enquire of him. Only if we seek him, will he answer us."²⁸

One testimony of seeing and experiencing Scripture in this light is from Nabeel Qureshi, a former Muslim who converted to Christianity. He shares his entire life story and conversion as a follower of Christ in *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*. Writing about the Bible, "I knew that what I held in my hands was life itself. This was truly God's word, and it was as if I was meeting Him for the first time. I began pouring over the Bible, absorbing every word as if it were water for my parched soul, a soul that had never before drunk from the fountain of life."²⁹ For him, it became, "As if the living word of the Bible were in conversation with me, Jesus began responding to my heart."³⁰ When people are able to see the Bible as God speaking to them through the Scriptures and that God uses it to reveal his love for them and steadily reveal his plan, then they will be able rejoice in the Bible with faith, regardless of present questions or current situations.³¹

²⁸ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, 136. Emphasis original.

²⁹ Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 276.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

³¹ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, 136.

This goal, consistently stated, can grow within the congregation a desire to read the Bible more in its entirety and discuss it within smaller groups or personal relationships. Reading Scripture will become a healthy, productive discipline, growing their knowledge, increasing their capacity to inform others, shaping their daily lives, and producing a greater biblical literacy and vitality for the church congregation. The goal is for the people to attain a new understanding of the Bible being God's gift to us and devoting their life to increasing their grasp of it in the time they have been given on earth. The hope is that they begin to see and realize, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Colin Marshall and Tony Payne share a vision where this goal is being achieved,

Imagine if all Christians, as a normal part of their discipleship, were caught up in a web of regular Bible reading—not only digging into the word privately, but reading it with their children before bed, with their spouse over breakfast, with a non-Christian colleague at work once a week over lunch, with a new Christian for follow-up once a fortnight for mutual encouragement, and with a mature Christian friend once a month for mutual encouragement.³²

This would grow a network of personal relationships through prayer and Bible reading that can be both very simple and easy for many to be engaged.³³

Through continual knowledge and maturity in Scripture and church community, the communication plan will highlight the third goal for believers to be able to articulate and defend the gospel more effectively to peers. This is another relevant challenge for churches and Christians within the culture of Jackson. As many were born into the

³² Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, 57.

³³ Ibid.

Christian faith and church home of their family, when faced with other peers desiring to know why they believe as they do, they simply may not have the answers. Instead, their responses may include or emphasize that they have always been Christians, or that their families taught them these principles, or that they've been raised in church. Many lack the tools, knowledge, self-awareness, and gospel fluency to be cognizant of how to address and respond to such inquiries. This concern is not new to this particular culture or time period. George Whitefield had the same challenges in 18th century Britain where, "Many in the audience, he posited, would say they had believed since early childhood, since before they could remember. This, to Whitefield, was dubious: When had they realized the damning gravity of their sin? When had they turned to Christ for rescue? Too many 'mistake a historical faith for a true faith wrought in the heart by the Spirit of God,' he warned."³⁴

Seeing the gospel anew in creative and integrated teaching, discussing and discovering its aspects with others in community, people are prompted to understand it more fully on their own, have biblical answers while becoming more sensitive and receptive to others in relating with people who are curious and inquisitive because they are empathetic to both the posture and position of those who form these spiritual questions. They are able to be effective witnesses as, "The best defense of the faith is its compelling (lived) demonstration: the action by which disciples exhibit the reality of God and the gospel."³⁵ In so doing they demonstrate the truth, goodness, and beauty that is to be found in Jesus Christ. This is the mission of the Church, to show Christ as his

³⁴ Kidd, *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father*, 155.

³⁵ Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine*, 237.

witnesses with the witness being most effective when people move outwards in love, sensitivity, openness, and receptivity, seeing their lives as not only part of God's divine plan, but being able to demonstrate all God has done and is doing in their life, that it is good, beautiful, and available to all.

This connects to the fourth goal of the communication program to help church members become more outwardly focused and intentionally engaged in mission to neighbors and nations as, "The church's mission is to present Christ, not to extend Christendom. The beginnings of the modern missionary movement arose from this distinction."³⁶ If the people of the church are renewed by the gospel and subscribe to the faith that there are no accidents in God's plan for their lives, they can readily reach the realization of God calling them out to others because, "The goal of biblical interpretation is obedient listeners who are persuaded to live according to the double love command (Mark 12:29–31). Preachers should persuade their congregations both to assent to Christian doctrine and to act it out."³⁷

With this knowledge and faith, the congregation can also be awakened to the fact that the people in their life are present for a reason and the gifts or interests God has given them were given to them to be used to serve and create works for God's glory and the common good. Mission then becomes not something they do if they have time; it's their entire life, comprised in work, recreation, family, and personal relationships. With this perspective, they become more aware and sensitive of people, places, and neighbors in their life who are spiritually, emotionally, and physically in need.

³⁶ Ibid., 182.

³⁷ Ibid., 182-183.

In addition, they more fully realize and connect their interest in other nations or cultures as a gift given to them by God. They then become much more open to learn about these nations and cultures, begin to pray for them regularly, and even go to these places near or far for which they might never have imagined themselves going, yet for which they now believe is part of God’s design for their growth and service. Individuals are able to realize, “If you are worried about the people outside, the most unreasonable thing you can do is to remain outside yourself. Christians are Christ’s body, the organism through which He works. Every addition to that body enables Him to do more. If you want to help those outside you must add your own little cell to the body of Christ who alone can help them.”³⁸

This leads to the fifth and final goal of the communication plan with people engaging in discipleship to others by the means of mentoring relationships. Colin Marshall and Tony Payne articulate the goal of all Christian ministry should be disciple making so that, “The sermon on Sunday should aim to make disciples, as should the small group that meets on Tuesday night, the men’s breakfast that happens once a month, and the informal gathering of Christian friends that happens on Saturday afternoons.”³⁹ Too often, however, “The focus has shifted away to form individuals and their growth as disciples, to activities and events and growth in numbers.”⁴⁰

Yet Jesus calls us to make disciples, therefore none of those who are his disciples are exempt. We are to connect with non-Christians and to encourage fellow Christians in

³⁸ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 64.

³⁹ Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, 153.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

their walk with Christ. This can occur in all situations, “From chatting over the proverbial back fence with a non-Christian neighbor to writing an encouraging note to a Christian friend; from inviting a family member to hear the gospel at a church event to meeting one to one to study the Bible with a fellow Christian; from reading the Bible to your children to making a Christian comment over morning tea at the office.”⁴¹ This process of making disciples is much more personal, relational, and organic, than structured and organized. It does include the teaching and training of other disciples to make disciples. Instead such training is, “not simply the imparting of certain skills or techniques. It involves nurturing and teaching people in their understanding and knowledge (their convictions), in their godliness and way of life (their character), and in their abilities and practical experience of ministering to others (their competence). This sort of training is more like parenthood than the classroom.”⁴²

This overall discipleship within individuals and amongst a community can lead to an increase in reconciliation with others, either those within the church or outside its walls with whom they have significant differences, whether in relational conflict or differences of opinion that have ultimately led to fracturing. John Perkins believes, “God is calling me to help churches see and incorporate reconciliation as an essential part of discipleship. The captivity of the church to our culture has left us so divided. And we think division is natural. We think the traditions we’ve inherited from our forbears are the

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 154-155.

way things have to be. But Jesus came to drive a wedge in the status quo and create spaces where new life can happen.”⁴³

This program can thereby grow discipleship as it offers a radical picture of a community committed to Jesus, its city, and all people. It shows, “The call to reconciliation is a call to commitment—to take up the cross and give ourselves to this community in this place. The world needs a church that does something to interrupt business as usual where we are.”⁴⁴ This ministry of reconciliation is a challenge to, “Give everything for God’s vision of a church where we love one another across society’s dividing lines.”⁴⁵ The church can become a beautiful picture where, “Jesus wants us to become communities of believers who give ourselves in service to one another as a new family in the world.”⁴⁶ In this picture the church is not, “held captive by the traditions of our parents or by fear and concern for our children.”⁴⁷ It is a place where more and more accept this call and challenge, “To join God’s movement and enjoy the life we were made for together with all God’s children.”⁴⁸

In such a pronounced discipleship culture emphasized by the church and moved into by its people, the congregation grows more sensitive and open to the people in their lives whom God is leading them to and connects them with by way of relationship or small group interaction. People become less fearful and hesitant to intentionally move

⁴³ Marsh and Perkins, *Welcoming Justice*, 48.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

into these mentoring relationships for both their own friendship and individual discipleship. They readily see common interests, similarities, and life experiences as unique opportunities for God to play a role in building spiritual connections and gospel bridges for growth, witness, and relational evangelism. They show God's redemptive plan in action through these personal relationships and networks within community as people help disciple others and they readily engage in this role to mentor or be mentored by someone and grow in their own discipleship.

These stated goals of this communication program are addressed and emphasized so that the communication has an exponential, multiplying effect in the lives of believers and the overall life of the church body. These goals help the church's program be assured that the communication itself, in preaching, teaching, classes, small groups, and written devotions, is not an end in itself. Instead, it is meant to form, shape, and encourage all people in the church as much as possible so they can go and impact others with greater gospel awareness to their own individual communities. This allows the program to be nurturing and beneficial for the larger church body, the local community, and the world.

CHAPTER SIX

IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

This chapter provides an overview for the process of integrating this communication program into the life and ministries of of Bellwether Church. The chapter begins with formulating the communication, establishing its vision and direction, by the church's primary leadership team of the church elders. It continues with a proposed timeline to launch this communication plan by first sharing with the church's servant deacon team, then moving to the church's small group leaders, and finally to members of the congregation. It concludes with potential ways to assess the communication plan's effectiveness over its given time period once it has been implemented into the church body.

Strategy to Plan and Enact Communication Program

The strategy to develop and implement the communication program begins with Bellwether church's elder team planning out the Sunday sermon series for its two-year timeframe. Together, the elder team would plan the seven sermon series, each being 12 weeks each over the course of the 84 Sundays. With the plan's two-year timeframe, there would be some pauses within the series, also allowing for flexibility within the individual

sermon series or for additional time as the program proceeds. These sermon series have already been addressed, yet the elder team would oversee and help plan the series and its focused topics as they possess the greatest insight into what the congregation needs for both their personal growth and corporate health of the church body.

In addition, church elders work together to plan out the midweek equipping study, connecting it to the Sunday sermons and including further teaching in the areas of apologetics and discipleship. The elders would assist the pastor by helping to lead, guide, and teach this midweek study. Together, the elder team would integrate biblical literacy and practical steps in the midweek study to help form and train the potential leaders, mentors, and teachers who participate in it.

Throughout this time of planning the sermon series and the equipping class studies, the elders would also engage in focused prayer for the overall communication program. Prayer is essential for program before and throughout its time period. This allows the elders to seek and hear from God as to the planned sermon series, studies, and for the overall church congregation in their individual growth. With such prayer, there can be further spiritual discernment, focus, and wisdom as to the program's steps, direction, and format. The goals for the program cannot be reached unless there is persistent and continual prayer before and during the communication program for the life of the entire church body. For the communication program to produce revival and growth in the church, the elder team cannot exclude the power, discipline, and vitality given to prayer.

In the elder meetings, therefore, time would be spent for planning and even more time spent for intentional prayer. Through prayer, God can further empower the elders in

vision, unity, and direction in the implementation of the program. Thus, the program itself can cultivate the life of prayer amongst the church's leadership body as well as incorporating prayer into the various aspects of the communication plan as it is continually implemented into the life of the church as a whole. This can lead to its desired goals and potentially give a greater sense of God bringing about revival in the church through prayer and this consistent planned strategy and teaching.

There would then be thoughtful and strategic planning for the small group curriculum of the program that would entail three primary steps. The first would be to begin writing the small group curriculum, with its foundation being the sermon plans and series, after they had been successfully organized. Along with the pastor and elders, a team of writers from the church would assist in this process of drafting the written studies for the groups.

The next step would be to coordinate monthly meetings with all current and potential small group leaders so they can begin to become aware and acclimated about the upcoming program, its goals, and the underlining philosophy behind it. In this time, group leaders can be further instructed as to how vital the group gatherings can be to the presentation and implementation of the communication plan, yet more importantly in the overall communication of the gospel itself. They would be shown and instructed how the informal setting of, "The home could be used for systematic teaching and instruction (Acts 5:42), planned presentations of the gospel to friends and neighbors (Acts 10:22), prayer meetings (Acts 12:12), impromptu evangelistic gatherings (Acts 16:32), follow up sessions with the inquirers (Acts 18:26), evenings devoted to instruction and prayer (Acts

20:7), and fellowship (Acts 21:7).”¹ These monthly meetings would attempt to convey and stress the opportunity and necessity for the group leaders of these small group meetings for the cultivation of the program itself and the church’s ministry as a whole. In this time, these leaders would have a season to connect with the vision of the communication program and see the vital role the groups would play in it and their own leadership of the group throughout the timeframe.

These meetings with the small group leaders would provide the existing group leaders an opportunity as well to contribute useful input, feedback, and insight into the groups they lead as well as how both the overarching program and the curriculum could be more effective for the people in the church and the individual groups. Such meetings would be instructive times of listening and responding to other leaders throughout the church, with the potential to consider productive adjustments for the program itself and the small group ministry. This time is vital as it allows group leaders an initial voice in the formulating process of the curriculum for the groups they lead.

The third step would be for the pastor and elders to take time to meet individually with small group leaders to help cultivate their own discipleship and leadership while offering them more of an opportunity to share their thoughts about the program before it begins and to move forward in greater unity. Tim Keller stresses the importance of taking intentional time to develop these leaders because, “Lay ministers are people who actively bring their Christian example and faith into the lives of their neighbors, friends, colleagues, and community. My experience has been that when at least 20 to 25 percent of a church’s people are engaged in this kind of organic, relational gospel ministry, it

¹ Keller, *Shaped by the Gospel: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, 278.

creates a powerful dynamism that infuses the whole church and greatly extends the church's ability to edify and evangelize."²

These small group leaders will continue to minister within the small groups and develop their own gifts as they, "counsel, encourage, instruct, disciple, and witness with both Christian and non-Christian individuals. They involve themselves in the lives of others so they might come to faith or grow in grace."³ As they do so, they can grow more of a, "healthy sense of ownership of the church. They think of it as 'our church,' not 'their church' (referring to the ordained leaders and staff). They freely give of their time, talent, and treasure. This is the tide that lifts every boat in ministry."⁴ The communication program would provide a planned opportunity for the greater engagement of all the people participating in it to the church as a whole, in their discovery and knowledge of the gospel, and this cultivation of a culture of lay ministry throughout the church body. Because of the program, the people of the church are provided with resources and instruction for them to develop as lay ministers and for the much of the entire church to engage such a lay ministry to one another and to others outside the life of the church.

In crafting the written devotions and plays, a small writing team would be assembled of not more than five people, including the pastor, who assist in writing these devotions and plays, thereby allowing them to contribute to the program. As part of this group, the pastor would have a strong voice in connecting the devotions and plays to the sermon series preached in Sunday worship. The team could begin crafting these short

² Ibid., 280.

³ Ibid, 281.

⁴ Ibid.

devotions and creating the plays so there would be ample time for revision and review before the church begins the formal communication plan. There would be sustained encouragement and direction for the writers to produce artistic works that are deemed to be both effective and excellent and to use their gifts to this end. This can show the high priority the church will continue to give to artistry and creativity in order to connect with others who would not normally attend a church in this context. Keller shares the importance of excellent artistry within a church for evangelism,

The quality of our music, your speech, and even the visual aesthetics in worship will have a marked impact on its evangelistic power, particularly in cultural centers. In many churches, the quality of music is mediocre or poor, but it does not disturb the faithful. Why? Their faith makes the words of the hymn or the song meaningful, despite its lack of artistic expression; what's more, they usually have a personal relationship with the music presenter. But any outsider who comes in as someone unconvinced of the truth and having no relationship to the presenter will likely be bored or irritated by the expression. In other words, excellent aesthetics includes outsiders, while mediocre aesthetics excludes. The low level of artistic quality in many churches guarantees that only insiders will continue to come. For the non-Christian, the attraction of good art will play a major role in drawing them in.⁵

For such reasons, there will be an increased emphasis and priority on excellence for all the written creative works produced, as well as those ultimately performed, by the church for this communication plan.

The timeframe for these initial steps in planning the program would occur in the six months leading up to its launch. This time allows ample opportunity for further conversation, communication of vision, additional insight, engagement of leaders in the plan, and prayer. The church elders would continually make intentional time to pray over the program in these months before its launch. In this time and through their corporate

⁵ Ibid., 305.

prayer, the elders can become more spiritually united in the vision of the program as they pray and discussed its vision together. It would also allow time to consider any adjustments or changes that might need to be implemented as the elders prayed over it together and had fruitful conversation with other church leaders about the program's aspects, goals, and strategy.

Specific Timeframe of the Program

The timeframe of the program would begin with the casting of vision, conversation, and prayer in the summer of 2019. Initially the elders would begin praying, studying, discussing, and planning meetings with other church leaders during this time. Bellwether Church's elders would then be involved from the beginning to give needed prayer, insight, and wisdom for the program. This allows the church to live into its structure of being elder led, as elders oversee the church's vision and teaching, while providing needed support to the pastor for the program's structure and oversight. There would be prayer that, through the communication plan, there would be, "A very living and real consciousness of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church."⁶ In addition, the elders would pray the congregation would have a, "Personal assurance, that the Church may know this love of God, and may be let into the secret of his plans, and his purposes, his proposals, and his ideas."⁷

Moving forward from the elder team, the church's ministry staff would be made aware of the program and be asked to pray for it and begin conversation around it. This

⁶ Lloyd-Jones, *Revival*, 178.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

would also begin in the summer of 2019. The staff will be instrumental in helping implement the program into the church's various ministries and assist in writing the small group curriculum and the church-wide devotions. This allows for the program to be integrated across the church's focused ministries of worship, students, children, and small groups. All the staff would be required to participate in the midweek equipping study as well as to lead an individual small group. Therefore, the church staff would be highly involved not only by participating in the overall plan, but also in connecting it with the ministry areas where they provide leadership. This can assist in streamlining the program across the various sectors of church ministry and help mitigate any confusion or even overwork by the church's staff. As Tim Keller differentiates staff as lay leaders and the congregation as lay ministers, it is important to give needed help to these staff lay leaders to implement the program to prevent burnout or ministry fatigue in this season,

By lay leaders, I mean volunteers who lead and run church programs. Being a lay leader can be time-consuming and may even make lay ministry more difficult for a season. Lay leadership usually involves some level of leadership and organizational ability, while lay ministry does not. Lay leaders are extremely important to lay ministry—overworking lay leaders can kill any ministry in a church—but they are not the same thing.⁸

Intentional and continual instruction and guidance to the staff will be necessary so there can be less confusion and more unity in the goals of the program and its implementation into the various church ministries.

The elders would then plan and facilitate a church leader retreat in August of 2019 where the staff and deacons would come together with them. The communication program would be further presented and outlined in this retreat. Deacons in the church

⁸ Keller, *Shaped by the Gospel: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, 280.

would be required to participate in the program's midweek equipping study and be part of one of the church's smaller groups. This retreat will be a productive opportunity to cast the vision of the program, leading to positive conversation and contribution from the church's deacon team that includes 15 men and women.

The first monthly meeting to share the program with small group leaders would also occur in August of 2019. The church's elders would gather the small group leaders together and present the plan, giving as much time as needed their feedback, questions, and constructive criticism. The small group leaders would be encouraged to fully engage in the communication plan, as these meetings with small group leaders would continue each month throughout the fall of 2019. This pastoral support is vital for ministry to be effective amongst the congregation within the overall communication plan as, "Whatever else they do, pastors and other church leaders must be aware of the importance of lay ministry and intentional about preparing people for it. They must be personally involved in the lives of lay ministers."⁹ This time and these personal meetings would provide opportunities for a deepening of relationships between the pastor, elders, and these ministry leaders for support, encouragement, and edification. This can be platform for a deepening engagement to a shared vision for the church and lead to creative conversations and instruction for everyone involved.

There would then be three church member meetings in September, October, and November of 2019 where the overall communication program would be presented and outlined to all church members. Conducting these meetings allow as many church members as possible to at least attend one or two of the meetings. The program would be

⁹ Ibid., 285-286.

explained and clarified in greater detail with the program's goals highlighted. The members would be made aware that the program would begin in January at the beginning of 2020. Members would be asked to participate in it and begin praying for it. These meetings would contribute to the member's involvement, as it would give them space and time to consider any reservations, ask any questions that might arise, and have beneficial church-wide conversation about why the program would be needed and the results it hopes to bring to the wider church body.

The congregation could see the overall purpose of this structured plan to further their own discipleship, apologetics, and evangelism and to give them tools, venues, and opportunities to use in inviting others into the life of the church in a non-threatening manner. These opportunities are to be strategic for the church because, "It is certainly possible to have an evangelistic dynamic built strictly on relational, informal outreach by laypeople. Nevertheless, laypeople are often encouraged and instructed in their ministry if a church provides a varied set of events, gatherings, and meetings in which nonbelievers are exposed more directly to both Christians and to the gospel."¹⁰ These congregational meetings would allow the church members to see how the communication plan can provide them with these services, meetings, studies, and groups where they can grow and easily invite others to participate.

From these meetings, new small groups could potentially begin with new leaders arising when they become attracted to the possibilities and potential of the program. These new groups could begin meeting together to form community over the fall of 2019.

¹⁰ Ibid., 288.

The groups could encourage and initiate new energy and life into the church with their excitement about the plan and the opportunity to journey together as a church body throughout its timeframe. Keller notes, “When groups are relatively new and the dynamics are still ‘wet cement’, they can better embrace and draw in people who are exploring Christianity.”¹¹

The fall of 2019 would give further time to plan out, pray over, and adjust the program before its launch in January of 2020. In this season, the program would be continually highlighted during Sunday sermons to increase awareness and build momentum. By the time it begins in January 2020, there would be an initial three-part series about the vision of program through the sermons in the Sunday worship service and then the program would begin around the end of January 2020.

This entire period of preparation and vision casting would allow the pastor and elders to, “Work in a variety of ways to lay a theological groundwork for lay evangelism using the gospel itself. This must be done in all kinds of venues—teaching, preaching, and pastoral support.”¹² This can be a time marked by prayer and holiness in the pastor, the elders, and other church leaders. For the programs to be fully effective, the congregation will not only need to see and hear the vision for the plan itself, but also the model of the pastor and elders for their own spiritual growth as, “The single most important way for pastors or church leaders to turn passive laypeople into courageous and gracious lay ministers is through their own evident godliness. A pastor should be marked by humility,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 287.

love, joy, and wisdom that is visible and attracts people to trust and learn from them.”¹³ Through this time of prayer, conversation, and sharing the vision of the communication program in a humble and sincere manner, the congregation can begin to witness the need, opportunity, relevance, and potential effectiveness of its aims and goals, as well as enter into it in their own prayer for the church and personal ministry.

Assessment of the Program

The church’s elders and staff would assess the program by surveying the congregation to see its effectiveness in meeting its stated, intended goals during four time periods throughout the program: May of 2020, November 2020, April 2021, and October of 2021. These periods would therefore provide healthy and candid overview and insight into the program every six months during the program’s overall timeframe. The goals are to see what aspects were most beneficial for individuals of the congregation engaged in the program while they participated in its multiple formats of Sunday worship and preaching, equipping class, small groups, written devotions, and further creative works.

The surveys would focus on both the previous six months, and then the entire timeframe as it moves forward into the first and second year of its existence. This allows church elders, staff, deacons, and small group leaders to see the program’s areas of greater and lesser effectiveness, as well as the time periods within it where it may have been more fruitful than others. Included would be questions for all church members as to whether the Sunday worship preaching, midweek equipping class, small groups, written devotions, or the creative plays were most instrumental for them in seeing and

¹³ Ibid., 288.

understanding the gospel. Church members would be asked to rank the communication forms from highest to lowest as to state the ones that were most helpful for them in their learning about the gospel, furthering their theological and biblical understanding, and fostering their individual spiritual growth.

The congregation would be surveyed as to which of the communication forms best assisted them in learning how to more effectively articulate the gospel to others. Their responses would greatly contribute in determining what medium was most productive to church members in the goal of apologetics and evangelism. It would also allow church leaders to see what medium is most effective for these specific goals in the overall local culture of city where the church is engaged in ministry. Members could respond whether they learned and grew in apologetics and evangelism through the preaching, equipping class, small groups, or written devotions and plays. The church would be able to see which of these tools helped others not only in understanding the gospel, but also in effectively relating it to others in their lives and their professional spheres of influence. In the area of apologetics, the survey would also question the congregation as to the most effective venue for apologetics and evangelism. This would focus on whether interpersonal relations, small group gatherings, or invitations to church worship services or other planned church events were most effective on connecting to outsiders and their own personal relationships.

Members would also have the opportunity to share what medium contributed most to their overall growth in discipleship. Questions posed would be if they grew more by the preaching in Sunday worship services throughout the program, in the equipping class if they were participating in it, through the relationships and conversation of the

small groups, or in the written devotions distributed each week. The congregation's response to this is vitally important in learning how the church can best form disciples in the present and for its future. The members would rank these mediums in order of how they contributed to individual discipleship and if they felt the combination of these mediums was useful or if they felt one or two was most important in their personal growth. This allows the church to determine where best to focus its resources and if any of the mediums should be changed or even discontinued. It can answer the question as to whether a midweek equipping study could be more beneficial than smaller groups in the life of the church or if the written devotions should be continued in the future or if they should be provided less regularly in subsequent years.

The number of people involved in the program would be seen as well as if others outside the church were able to effectively enter the program after it had begun and then use the program to become more involved and connected to the church throughout its timeframe. The survey would gauge if any church members stopped participating in the program or even left the church during this time. Church's leaders could be able to see if weekly Sunday attendance grew throughout the communication program, if the overall church membership grew as well during its time period, if more people became connected and engaged in smaller groups, and if the program led to more people being involved in the church's local and global mission partnerships. A goal for the program would be more people participating in the overall life of the church through Sunday worship, small groups, and engagement in the church's formal mission partnerships. Therefore, the assessments given every six months would be instrumental to see if the

program was meeting these goals and to gauge its overall effectiveness in each of these focused areas.

Numerical responses of individual confessions of faith and baptisms during the two-year period would be revealed within the assessment. The church could see if the program assisted in bringing about new believers and how many people were baptized or expressed a desire to consider baptism. This would allow the church to gauge if the program was effective in producing new converts, or at the very least more individuals curious about personal conversion and baptism, both with those who were attending Bellwether Church and those outside it who began to connect with the church during the communication program's time period.

Within the assessment, there would be an area of questions focused specifically on small groups. Questions regarding the small group ministry of the church would address the leadership of the various groups, the overall community of the group, the degree to which participation was encouraged and made accessible, and the small group curriculum provided by the communication program. Those who were participating in smaller groups would be asked if the program's small group curriculum was more useful in helping to grow their group in its overall health and for themselves in their own individual spiritual growth. They would be asked to respond if the curriculum provided to the group, and its teaching by the small group leader, produced greater dialogue, stimulating further questions, and fostered the overall community for the group. Small group members would have an opportunity to offer their thoughts and opinions about the group as a whole, the leadership of their group, and its curriculum. These responses would also be anonymous so as the members of the group could share openly their

individual perspectives and feel free to give all their thoughts about the group they were engaged in.

Overall, these four assessments throughout the timeframe of the program and the final overall assessment after the program's completion will provide church members and participants an opportunity to give thoughtful, reflective feedback, honest critique, and insight into what they feel best contributes to their gospel understanding, ability to engage in apologetics, relational community, and personal discipleship. Responses from the congregation will allow the church elders and other ministry leaders to hear from the congregation areas and means of communication that would be most effective for the overall health of the church body and the spiritual growth of its people.

Assessments would additionally be highly constructive in helping the church's leadership plan future teaching and preaching, communication within written devotions and group curriculum, and overall ministry strategy for the church body. The first and second assessments would be early enough to allow the program to be modified if needed as it continued to track the goals and results based on the congregation's response. The third and final assessments would be more comprehensive and detailed as to how church members and participants felt the program contributed to their individual spiritual growth in the past year and how they felt it impacted the larger church body. This would give fruitful wisdom into the program's impact, results, and overall contribution to the church. It could then be modified and adapted for even greater communication of the gospel and church growth for the future in a subsequent communication plan as this program comes to its conclusion.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Bellwether Church is a local church situated in the context of the Bible belt in the city of Jackson that aims to serve this city by fostering healthy, authentic community and growing its capacity for mission in going out to connect neighbors and nations to the gospel of Jesus Christ. While the church was founded and grew with the dual vision of developing discipleship and evangelism in its people, the cultural context where it is situated presents many challenges to both leaders and members of the church body. Within this context of religiosity and consumer Christianity, knowledge of churches and the Bible is very common yet personal and societal transformation can be hindered by the pressures of class and race, leading to a great degree of religious conformity instead of gospel renewal and sacrificial living. In addition, there is a saturation of churches so that many individuals have spent much of their life in a church, thereby contributing to a degree of complacency in knowledge of the gospel, biblical understanding, and ability to communicate their faith with others. Instead, many believe irregular attendance at a church of their choosing is all that suffices in living out their stated belief in Christianity. The culture can easily lead people to this position, becoming detrimental in their growth and understanding of all a living faith in Jesus Christ entails.

This paper proposes a communication project, with preaching as its primary way of communicating the gospel, to shape the lives of this congregation in a new direction, helping them articulate the gospel to themselves and others in their communities of church, city, family, work, and world. There is a sincere hope that the plan can show and portray, to the people of the church, as well as to others outside it that, “the Christian is in

a different position from other people who are trying to be good. They hope, by being good, to please God if there is one; or—if they think there is not—at least they hope to deserve approval from good men. But the Christian thinks any good he does comes from the Christ—life inside him. He does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us.”¹

Beginning with the preaching, the communication plan also includes and integrates a midweek equipping class, small groups, written works of devotion, and creative plays into the life of the church body. This program’s general aims are to significantly increase the church member’s capacity for gospel apologetics, evangelism, and discipleship. Such an overarching and specific program for a church is highly needed in this context and can be productive in helping the congregation as a whole and individuals within it move past its cultural religious assumptions and barriers of race and class for their own spiritual growth as believers of the gospel and grow more fully into an authentic, healthy church community with the gospel as its center and reaching out to connect and witness to neighbors and nations in a productive, fruitful manner.

This program is needed because of Jackson’s specific context where many people here know about Church and the Bible, yet aren’t equipped or confident to fully live out their faith. Attending a local church is more used for people and families to check their box of being a church member, even when attending sporadically, and being part of the right church with the priority of it being identified with a certain social class. This cultural aspect can be seen and manifested as most often churches are used more for social and business connections rather than intentional learning, worshipping, serving,

¹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 63.

and seeking those in need of connection and community. Ministering in such a context, Bellwether Church needs an overarching program of presenting, teaching, and equipping the gospel to its people so the congregation can witness what a church should be and can be through the power of God's Word communicated in different formats and the Holy Spirit working amongst its people as they grow together and learn how to live the gospel out in their daily lives.

Through a church-wide communication program such as this, many members and visitors will be able to see the gospel anew or even for the first time. By God's grace and through his Spirit, they will be able to recognize false idols of family, wealth, and even of church itself as they experience continual teaching in aspects of the gospel and healthy community as they discuss and discern such learning together. This is vital in a culture of performance and works where one can go through their lives feeling duty-bound as they believe Christianity is something they should achieve rather than hearing, reading, learning, and sharing the beauty that is the gospel of grace. This truth and its communication will transform some and be resisted by others, yet it will ultimately grow a gospel-centered community for the people of Bellwether Church and the city of Jackson.

The program is designed to help equip the members of the church congregation for apologetics, evangelism, and discipleship. This will be both personal for individuals in the congregation and communal for the church body as a whole. Members will learn how to communicate their faith in simple language, empowering them to speak and share with others outside the walls of the church. They will grow as witnesses for the gospel, both in their words as they share the story of the gospel in the Bible and in their present

lives, as well as in their sacrificial actions to others in the community. In all this, the congregation will be further formed as disciples for Jesus Christ, realizing they are growing to be sent out to this city in need of gospel transformation as well as to the world. Church members and visitors, empowered in this way, will be more able to teach and serve one another, the church as a whole, and their local community.

Over time, this communication plan will increase the overall maturity of the church body, allowing the church to grow in a healthy way. This growth will not be the result of people's social drives or goals for them to attend the most popular or "most relevant" church in the city. Its growth will occur as others see people who are both transformed and being formed by the gospel. This will not attract everyone, yet it will appeal to many, and those who attend, become connected, and eventually join the church will have an opportunity within this communication plan to intentionally and robustly grow their faith.

The program will also produce and manifest healthy discipleship as lay leaders in the church are trained and mentored to disciple and mentor others, within groups or their personal relationships, thus producing a culture of exponential, deep, spiritual growth as disciples are continually formed. The plan has the potential to bring about a renewed revival in the church body when its people witness the fruits of their learning of the Bible and the gospel, and sharing in smaller communities. Such revival can occur in many places within the church's life, from Sunday worship, to the equipping class, to small groups, and into their individual relationships. This revival is what the congregation of Bellwether church needs to be witnesses to this city and the world and it can be

evidenced through the unity of participation and cultivation of growth within this communication plan.

This program will be initially given much prayer, thought, and preparation by the church's elder team, including the pastor, and then communicated outward to the ministry leaders of the church's staff and the servant leaders of the church's deacon team. The elders would prepare and plan out the multiple sermon series for the preaching during its two-year timeframe, then base the intentional equipping class and the small group curriculum on these sermon series. This would allow the church body to be more unified and centered as it focuses on the sermon series, yet engages it more deeply and thoroughly through discussion and questions in the class and the small groups. Individually, the church body would be provided as well with the weekly devotions connected to the theme and ideas of the sermon series for further connectivity and creative communication for individuals, with the hope these devotions spur on more personal meditation, Bible study, and prayer. Creative plays would be performed occasionally in special seasons for the life of the church as an opportunity to see the gospel in an artistic manner and invite others to witness a different format of the gospel and communication of it within a local church. All these avenues will combine to produce a streamlined, yet diverse plan of communication for people to engage with, helping them see the gospel anew, understand it in a more effective manner, and produce fruitfulness for the life of the church body in the areas of discipleship, apologetics, and evangelisms.

The assessments throughout the communication plan's timeframe will offer multiple ways for the voices of the congregation's members to be heard and for the

church's elders and ministry leaders to adapt or adjust the program, or and even add new methods for its greater effectiveness as they listen to the feedback from the congregation. Through initial discussions, intentional presentations, and ongoing assessments, the people of Bellwether Church will continually be engaged in conversation about the program, both before it's formal beginning and then throughout its overall life period. This can allow and produce greater unity as the overall church body has continual communication about the program, its aims, goals, and potential effectiveness for the church. There will be great intentionality by the pastor and the elders to help the congregation walk through the program and see the reasons for its implementation and the opportunity it can give both individuals and the church as a whole for their growth.

This overall communication plan for Bellwether Church has great potential to contribute to the gospel understanding and evangelical outreach for its people. Such an overall, centered, inclusive, and streamlined program is necessary for this church in its given context. It can both unify the existing church body and expand its capacity for personal growth of those already committed to the church and in reaching out to others in the local community. It can focus the church's elder team in prayer and planning, while centralizing the mission of the various church ministries. The commitment to the program over the given time period will assist in such unity and direction of all church planning. The people of the church will have multiple opportunities to receive effective teaching and grow in greater relationship with one another. They will continually be offered tools and instruction on growing their own individual capacity as disciples for Jesus Christ, with the hope this growth will influence and increase their ability to engage their current context, relationships, and leverage their own relationships for gospel growth. For these

reasons, Bellwether Church will engage in this communication plan and pray for its ultimate fruitfulness for its people that they will personally grow in knowledge and cultivation of the gospel and corporately together as the church is engaged and further unified in teaching, community, and mission. This communication plan for the community of Bellwether Church has the potential to greatly assist its ministry within its city and around the world to advance the gospel for the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

There is the continual hope that this communication plan will result in an effectiveness that is not only maintained but also continued with further streamlined plans of communication within the life of the church as the leaders witness it in practice. The church's elders and ministry leaders will be able to learn much as the plan itself takes life and grows into the fabric of the church. As the elders and leaders witness its fruit and its weaknesses, it can be further modified to meet the needs and desires of the church as a whole. In this manner, it will be an initial model for stronger communication plans in subsequent seasons and years in the church's life. In essence, this program will not come to a conclusion, but instead it will be a springboard, platform, and starting point for further overarching plans in the future of Bellwether Church. Therefore it has great potential to be a continued strategy for church-wide communication in preaching, intentional teaching, small group ministry, and individual creative works of writing for any church.

The communication plan also has the potential to assist and help other churches and therefore grow greater partnerships and ministry connections between individual churches. In the practice and experience of its implementation, the leaders of Bellwether church can learn what is most effective for communication of the gospel in other

churches. As it is modified and adapted, the communication plan can be offered to other churches in this city and with partnering churches around the world. This will allow Bellwether Church to connect with and aid other churches and ministries in their own communication and cultivate stronger relationships amongst churches as it intentionally shares the ideas, vision, scope, and practice of the program. This can grow and produce a relational health between churches that can be very beneficial for the city itself and the kingdom of Christ as the communication plan becomes a means of connection between churches and an opportunity to share resources, ideas, and successful strategies.

In all these ways, this communication plan is a profound opportunity to cultivate the gospel in the life of Bellwether Church, engage and unite its congregation, increase discipleship amongst its people, connect with those outside the church, and serve as a means to grow stronger, healthy relationships with other churches and partners in ministry. Through prayer, the power of the Holy Spirit, intentional planning and preparation by church leaders, and the consistent engagement with the congregation, this communication plan will be effective to help others discover and live out the gospel. In this plan and to these goals, Bellwether Church will begin this communication plan for its people, the city to which it ministers, and the kingdom of Jesus Christ in the world.

APPENDIX A

Assessment

Gospel Communication Plan – Bellwether Church

6–month time period: May 2020–November 2020

- 1) What aspect of Bellwether Church’s Communication Plan has been most beneficial for you?
 - a. Preaching
 - b. Equipping Class
 - c. Small Groups
 - d. Written Devotions
 - e. Creative Writings and Plays

- 2) What aspect of the Communication Plan has helped you see and understand the gospel more?
 - a. Sunday worship services and preaching
 - b. Midweek Equipping Class (if participating in it)
 - c. Small Groups
 - d. Written Devotions
 - e. Creative Writings and Plays

- 3) Please rank the communication forms of this plan in order of their effectiveness for you in:
 - a. Learning about the gospel
 - Preaching
 - Midweek Equipping Class
 - Small Groups
 - Written Devotions
 - Creative Writings and Plays
 - b. Furthering your biblical and theological understanding
 - Preaching
 - Midweek Equipping Class
 - Small Groups
 - Written Devotions
 - Creative Writings and Plays
 - c. Fostering your individual spiritual growth
 - Preaching
 - Midweek Equipping Class
 - Small Groups
 - Written Devotions
 - Creative Writings and Plays

- 4) Which aspect of the Communication Plan has most assisted you in more effectively articulating the gospel to others?
 - a. Preaching
 - b. Equipping Class (if participating in it)
 - c. Small Groups
 - d. Written Devotions
 - e. Creative Writings and Plays

- 5) Which area of the Communication Plan has contributed most to growing your own capacity for apologetics and evangelism?
 - a. Preaching
 - b. Equipping Class (if participating in it)
 - c. Small Groups
 - d. Written Devotions
 - e. Creative Writings and Plays

- 6) What is the most effective venue for you in engaging in apologetics?
 - a. Inviting others and having conversation in Sunday worship services
 - b. Discussion in Equipping Class
 - c. Interaction in Small Groups
 - d. Inviting and having conversations around Creative Plays
 - e. Individual conversations outside church with friends and peers

- 7) What aspect of the Communication Plan has contributed most to your own individual discipleship?
 - a. Preaching in Sunday worship services
 - b. Equipping Class (if participating in)
 - c. Small Group relationships and community
 - d. Written Devotions

- 8) Please rank these means of communication in order of their contribution to your own personal discipleship.
 - Preaching and Sermon Series
 - Equipping Class
 - Small Groups
 - Written Devotions
 - Creative Works and Plays
 - Other areas – please describe below

9) Do you feel the combination of these forms of communication was useful to you or would you highlight one or two as most important and why?

10) Do you feel it is easy for someone to connect from outside the church into this communication program and if so, why?

11) Do you think that you should stop participating in the Communication Program and if so, why?

12) Has the program helped lead to your own conversion, making a confession of faith, or being baptized because of your participation in it?

13) Do you think the Communication Program is beneficial to the overall church body and if so, why?

14) Would you like to see this Communication Program continued at Bellwether Church?

15) How would you modify this Communication Program for the future?

Assessment of Small Groups

- 1) Has the Small Group curriculum connected with the Communication Program been useful in your own personal growth and discipleship and if so, how?

- 2) Has your Small Group leader stimulated more dialogue, conversation, and cultivated relationships in the group during the Communication Program?

- 3) Do you feel the Communication Program Small Group curriculum allows for greater participation in the group?

- 4) Has your small group grown over the course of the Communication Program?

- 5) Do you feel more inclined to invite new people to your small group because of the Communication Program and its curriculum?

- 6) Is your small group welcoming and engaging with new people in the group and has the Communication Program curriculum fostered this engagement?

- 7) Does your small group leader help you interact with the Bible more because of the Communication Program and its curriculum?

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