

How to Bring New Life to Declining Churches



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Truett
Seminary

A Digest for Church Renewal

Plus

Five Sermons On The Spirit-Filled Church

How to Bring New Life to Declining Churches

A Digest for Church Renewal

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5603 Elderwood Drive
Tyler, Texas 75703

Printed in the United States

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Dedicated To

The office staff at Truett Seminary

The people who keep things going

*René Maciel, Nancy Floyd, Dorothy Terry,
Angela Bailey, Teresa Muirhead, BJ Tisdale-Hyatt,
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Introduction/Forward

Ours is a day of digests: *Reader's Digest*, *Golf Digest*, *Screen Digest*, *Investors' Digest*, infinitus, ad nauseum, something that is a quick read for the busy person who doesn't have the time or the inclination for a full-length book. That's the idea behind this work.

Recently, a colleague who was the interim pastor of a plateaued church in a declining community suggested I write a brief paper to help churches like the one he had been serving and to help young pastors like the one they called to be their shepherd. I had written much on the subject over the past thirty years and thought I had already said everything I needed to say. But as I considered the need, I decided to make one last stab at offering much-needed help, this time in digest form.

This work is not for everyone. It is written principally for the large number of small churches that are plateaued and declining and for young pastors just beginning their work or bivocational pastors who are pressed for time.

These churches and these pastors are the backbone of American Christianity. In 1890, the Baptist General Convention of Texas accepted a challenge from Rufus Burleson, president of Baylor University at the time, to establish a church and a Sunday School in every community in the state. In less than 50 years, they had succeeded in their task. You will look long and hard before you find a community in Texas and for the most part, the entire South, that does not have at least one Baptist church in it. Many of those communities were once bustling, growing communities. But over the years, they have lost population through the urbanization of America. The decline of the community is mirrored in the decline of the church.

Many of them can remember the days when Sunday brought large crowds and revival meetings produced great

harvests. But those days are gone with the wind. City churches in declining neighborhoods have suffered the same fate. Many are now left with large sanctuaries and a scattering of people, mostly elderly. And most are pastored by young or bivocational pastors who need encouragement, a challenge, and new ideas. Those churches and leaders are the ones for whom this is written.

This is not an attempt to be novel or clever or even original. It is a quick read but not a quick fix. It deals with the basics—visionary leadership, building fellowship, praying, preaching, pastoring, visiting, and hard work—especially hard work. If it is followed, it will work. I would offer you a money-back guarantee, but this book is a gift, so I can't. It's free, but I trust not cheap.

Responding to a statement that her books are difficult to read, Toni Morrison reasoned, "Good. I find them hard to write." This is not hard to read, but it was hard to write. The hardest part was to keep it brief.

Jesus loved the church and died for it. We should love it, too, and if it is to come to new life, we will have to do some dying—dying to self, dying to ease, dying to complacency.

It is my hope that this book will help in this respect. In addition to a few "how-to" pages, there are five sermons on dealing with the spirit-filled church. I have striven to write simply, plainly, and hopefully, interestingly and practically. So let's get started. We've got lots to do, and not much time to do it.

Paul W. Powell

April 2005

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PART I

Steps to Renewal

1

Laying the Foundations

There are empty churches, declining churches, plateaued churches, fighting churches, and dead churches everywhere, but we should not despair that the church is not all that it ought to be. It is the glory of a plateaued church that it can grow. It is the hope of a declining church that it can be revived. To see a church grow or be revived is one of the deepest joys a minister can know.

Numerical growth, of course, is not the only sign of renewal in a church. If a church is in an established or declining community or neighborhood, then numerical growth may be minimal. If people have been in a neighborhood a long time, you have to assume that those who want to go to church are already going. The rest of the people have said by their actions that they don't want to go. That's a hard group to reach. Some of them can be reached, but not in great numbers and not without great effort.

But even if there is no significant numerical growth, a church can still be revived. Worship can become more exciting and meaningful. The people can find new joy in fellowship. Believers can grow in grace, in knowledge, in commitment, in involvement, in ministry and in missions. Spiritual lives can be enriched.

New ministries can be established to meet the needs of people who are poor, lonely, or caught in the web of drugs and alcohol. The hungry can be fed. The sick can be vis-

ited. The distressed can be counseled.

So don't think that just because a neighborhood or community is in decline that the church has to be in decline. There are multiple ways for renewal to occur. The purpose of these pages is to suggest practical ways to help that renewal to happen where you serve. That should be your goal.

2

Be a Leader

The place to begin in reviving a declining or plateaued church is pastoral leadership. Nothing ever rises above leadership—not a business, not a school, not a team, not a church.

The simplest definition of leadership is influence. It is the ability of one person to influence another person, or a group of people, to action. So the key to renewing a church in decline will be the ability of the pastor to influence the influencers (the key leaders) of the church. If the lay leaders could correct the situation by themselves, the church would not be in decline. It is a challenging responsibility to pastor a declining church, but the responsibility cannot be avoided or abdicated if the church is to become alive again.

In the made-for-television movie *Ike*, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in WWII, told Prime Minister Winston Churchill of England about his plan to delay the D-Day invasion from May to June 6. Churchill responded, “I must say, you know how to take charge.” General Eisenhower answered, “It is not about power, sir, but the judicious use of the responsibility you’ve entrusted to me” (*A&E*, May 31, 2004). That’s what pastoral leadership is about. Not power, but responsibility and the judicious exercise of it.

The goal of most churches is to meet next Sunday. They have no compelling vision that drives them. Left alone,

most churches will sit and do nothing and do it very well until Jesus comes again. Don't let them do that. As the pastor, you must develop a vision of what you think the church can be and ought to do. Then you must develop a plan, a strategy for getting that done. Finally, you must work closely with the established leaders of the church to secure their cooperation and participation in pursuit of the vision and in implementing the strategy. You can't do it all by yourself and you shouldn't try. The late President Ronald Regan reminded us that the best leader is not necessarily the one who does great things, but the one who gets the people to do great things. That's especially true in the church.

Make sure you respect and listen to your people. I know a pastor who is in trouble in his church for that very reason. The church is in decline and when concerned people approach him about his leadership, he gets mad. As a result, they have quit talking to him and now are talking about him—his poor leadership and his anger. Things have gone from bad to worse, and he will likely be terminated, primarily because of his pride and his temper. If only he had listened to his people and responded to them calmly....

So the place you begin in reviving a plateaued or declining church is with yourself. You must be the kind of minister you ought to be. If you are, you have the potential to be the catalyst God uses to revive the church. If you aren't, continued decline is almost certain.

There is no such thing as a born leader any more than there are born doctors and lawyers. Leadership is something you can learn, but you have to work at it. According to Lewis Timberlake, seventy-one percent of leadership is communication. Columnist Jay Ambrose wrote in an editorial, "Political figures in a democracy must still rely on voice as a principles means of leading" (*Tyler Morning Telegraph*, July 9, 2004). That's the way a pastor leads also, so look people in the eye and tell them your dreams, your

vision for the church.

Don't try to manipulate them by saying, "God told me to..." Don't try to force them to accept your ideas. Just tell them straight up, kindly, plainly, convincingly, what you think the church ought to do and trust them to follow you. But you've got to tell them. If you are afraid to do that, you'll never lead them. Your voice is your principal means of leading.

A minister can no longer command or demand followers. Ten to twenty years ago, leaders could be autocratic. Today, leaders must involve their people. People will support what they are involved in. To be effective, a leader must develop a consensus. A church is an organism and can't be run. You can run a hotel, but you can't run a home. A home is best when there is the least visible restraint and the most spontaneous affection. You can run a machine, but a church is a family. The preacher must create an atmosphere of love, trust, and freedom.

To be an effective leader, you must live a noble life. Character is essential to Christian leadership. It is a simple fact, we believe good people more than we do bad people. So bind yourself to high principles and live by them. Live so that you do not fear the light. Leading the church, pastoring the people, and being a good preacher are not isolated events. They cannot be separated from who you are and what you are. If people lose confidence in you as a person of integrity or compassion, they will not follow you or listen to you. Above all, love your people. As Rusty Walton, pastor of First Baptist Church, Conroe, said, "You can't lead them until you love them."

Take care of your marriage and family. Layman Dale Jones told Truett seminary students, it should never be said that you are "a star elsewhere and a stranger at home." Take care of your personal finances. Be a tither. Honor confidentialities. Be pure in all your relationships. If you don't, these things will catch up with you.

Don't criticize those who have gone before you. Every minister leaves the church in an unsatisfactory condition to some degree. You will, also.

Be patient. Only what the people will accept willingly will edify the church. Trust the Holy Spirit to guide you in all areas. Take Jesus as your model when he said to his disciples, "I have many things to say to you, but you cannot receive them now." People cannot be forced. It takes time for them to understand and embrace new ideas.

3

Make Prayer a Priority

Prayer must be at the center of any renewal in the church. It, more than anything else, changes churches and people. Hudson Taylor reminded us, “It is possible to move men to God through prayer alone.” It isn’t through quick and easy prayer, but through disciplined, dedicated, persistent prayer. So if you want to change the church, call the people to prayer.

Ask the Lord to give you and them a hunger for Him. Don’t pray just for Him to enlarge the church. Pray that He will deepen your dedication to Him. Roger Fredrickson reminds us, “The Spirit does not visit us with renewed grace and vision because we worry and strain and push. His coming to quicken us is a gift given to those who pray and wait and repent and receive, and then obey” (Roger Fredrickson, *The Church that Refused to Die*).

If the renewal of your church is not important enough to pray about for a sustained period of time, then it is not important enough to you. Here are some suggestions about prayer in church renewal:

- Pray in your own private devotionals for personal and church renewal.
- Make prayer an important part of the worship services.
- Have a real prayer meeting on Prayer Meeting nights.
- Encourage prayer in the home.

- Designate a room in the church as the prayer room and ask people to come throughout the day to pray for the church and for the needs of others.
- Have a weekly prayer breakfast or lunch to pray specifically for renewal.

4

Pastor the People

Next to prayer, pastoring the people is a way to revive a declining or a plateauing church. A reporter said of the late Pope John Paul II, "He was a man of God and he was a man of the people." He was certainly a man of prayer but he was also more accessible to people than any previous pope. This should be true of every minister.

One of the first things the pastor ought to do is to visit in the homes of every member of his congregation. Do that as soon as possible, certainly within the first year. Get to know your people by name. You are not going into their homes to check up on them, but just to get to know them and be their friend. This can best be achieved by meeting them on their own turf.

You will see pictures in their home, so ask about their family. Be interested in them and their children. Howard Hendricks reminds us, "You can impress people at a distance, but you impact them up close." Home visitation is the best way to get close to people in a hurry. The day of home visiting is not over. It still works for pastors, if not for anyone else. As you build relationships with your people, you will build both their confidence in you and their love for the church.

Visit by appointment when possible. Some of your people will be suspicious or nervous. They will wonder why you are coming. Some will not have had a visit from the pastor in a long time or perhaps ever, but as they real-

ize you are there just to be their friend, they will share their hurts, anguish, and joys with you. Give them the chance to voice words of praise, thanks, or concern, and then pray together.

Richard Marcus of the Neiman Marcus family and the new chairman of the board of Zales Corporation said in a recent radio interview, "Take good care of your merchandise, and it won't come back. Take good care of your customers, and they will come back." That works in churches, also.

Live as close to your people as possible. Isolation from them is fatal. Knowing them is one of the pastor's most important tasks. To know them, you must be with them. As I have said before, "After a while the shepherd ought to smell like sheep." It is one thing to know human nature from a book and another to know it first-hand. Whatever else you do or leave undone, get to know and take care of your people.

You can think of a lot of excuses not to go visiting. It is easy to slip into the office routine of shuffling papers, answering mail, and playing on the computer, so that you find it hard to leave the office to go among the people. Recently I said to a young pastor who e-mailed me about nothing far too often, "Get off that computer and go to work." I imagine that he spends hours a day e-mailing back and forth to friends when he ought to be out among his people.

Don't spend too much time going to conferences or denominational meetings. Stay at home and work. The field is the world, but your church is the force with which you cultivate the world.

Be available to your people. B. H. Carroll said that one night he read the four gospels and noted the times people tried to get an audience with Jesus—either one person or a group. He noted that there were at least 150 times when someone sought Jesus . . . and not once was anyone turned

away. It can be exhausting, but if we are going to be good ministers, we have to be available to our congregation.

Genuinely love and care for your flock. It is easy to become a professional who cares about people only for what they can do for you. Don't be a hireling. Don't just be a public figure.

Julia Ward Howe, the writer of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," went to nineteenth-century statesman Charles Sumner to plead for help for a needy family. Sumner replied, "Julia, I have become so busy I cannot concern myself with individuals." When that happens to us, we are busier than God intends us to be.

The local church should be a general hospital where each member receives intensive care. The way you care for people not only indicates your concern for them, but like it or not, it often determines how much they feel God cares. If you don't care about them and minister to them, they may wonder if God cares.

The elderly need special attention, and by the way, they are some of the easiest people for a new pastor to win over. They respond easily to a little attention and quickly love the new pastor who cares enough to visit them. You will soon learn that people talk. That is to say, the word soon spreads that you are out visiting, that you care, that you are a good pastor.

But you must not focus exclusively on senior adults or the church will grow old and arthritic and be unable to carry out its mission. It's hard to go to the ends of the earth on a walker. You must reach out to young people and young adults, also. A vital church must have the energy and vitality of youth as well as the maturity and stability of age to fulfill the Great Commission. So don't neglect any age group.

Visit shut-ins and people in nursing homes and hospitals on a regular basis. Honor the elderly, speak to children, and encourage young people.

When asked why he did not give more early encouragement to his son, Leonard Bernstein's father answered, "How was I to know he would grow to become Leonard Bernstein?" We never know what a child or a young person may become, so don't ignore them. Jesus didn't and neither should we.

Ecclesiastical fences are no longer high enough to keep sheep from jumping over them. People can, and will, leave their churches if they are not taken care of, so pastor your people.

5

Wake Up the Worship

The quickest and perhaps easiest way for a pastor to influence a church is through the worship service and preaching. It is the one time when all the church is together in one place. It is the one time when the pastor is most in control of what happens. It is the one time when you have the ear of all the people. In time, the worship service invariably will take on the flavor of your personality. So the pastor who wants to revive a plateaued or declining church must pay attention to every phase of worship.

Historically, worship is always changing, but it changes slowly. In the 17th century, some Baptists banished congregational singing from their worship because they considered it to be a desecration of worship. Worship was for prayer and preaching.

After singing was introduced there was disagreement over whether to sing hymns or Psalms. Musical instruments were accepted much later, but not without conflict. In 1804, a bass viol was used to accompany the congregational singing in the First Baptist Church of Providence, despite the objection of one opponent who declared that “to use a fiddle in the house of God would be a base violation of the sacredness of worship.” The idea of installing an organ was introduced in 1870 but it was 17 years later before it was finally installed. (J. Stanley Lemons, *The First Baptist Church of America*, The Charitable Baptist So-

ciety, Providence, RI. 2001, 14, 46).

B.H. Carroll, who pastored First Baptist Church of Waco and later founded Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, believed the sole purpose of a choir was to lead and unify the congregational singing. He said it was worse than an absurdity for a choir to sing by itself, and a sin when done habitually. It was 1873 before the congregation approved the use of musical instruments in worship (Alan Lefever, *Fight the Good Fight: The Life and Work of Benajah Harvey Carroll*, Eakins Press, Austin, 1994, 28).

The point is that worship is always changing, but change has come slowly and often painfully. Keep that in mind as you attempt to change things in the church.

You don't have to change the form of worship so much as the spirit in which you worship. Worship must be alive, interesting and energetic. Music is important, but you don't have to sing all new music. You can sing the old hymns if you sing them with a new spirit. Sing them with enthusiasm and joy. Sing hymns that people know, hymns that tell the gospel story, hymns they would likely hum at work or around the house or in the yard.

Above all, preach well. You do not have to be a great preacher, few will be, but you can be a good preacher. If you will pray fervently, study hard, read broadly, and mix with your people, you will be able to preach effectively. People will hear you out of relationships. If you are available to them, if you are with them in the hospital, if you baptize their children, if you marry their young, bury their loved ones, and help them with their hurts, they will hear you with open hearts and minds.

When you step to the pulpit, say something like, "Open your Bibles to" and then give your text. That points the people to God's Word from the first. While they are finding it, you may recognize someone, or extend a greeting, but then go immediately to your sermon.

Keep the sermon 20-25 minutes in length. Before his

Texas days and while he was in Washington representing Native American rights, General Sam Houston, hero of Texas' independence, using his hickory walking cane, beat Senator William Stanbery for slandering him. Since he had previously been a member of that body, the Senate decided to try him themselves. Houston served as his own defense attorney and made a very, very long and moving speech. When he finished, according to the made-for-television movie *Sam Houston, Hero of Texas*, the Senate applauded him and fined him ten dollars. In the midst of the trial, President Andrew Jackson, his friend and mentor, said, "He is the long windedest man I know. He never uses two words when seven hundred will do," and after his acquittal, Jackson said, "If words were bullets, he could win a war single-handedly."

That should never be said of you. Take a text, explain what it means, and apply it to the people's lives, then move on.

People do not listen well today, if they ever did. That's true, at least in part, because we listen much faster than most people can talk. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, "Most people speak at a rate of 120-150 words a minute, but we can process more than 500 words a minute which makes it hard for us to stay tuned to prolonged communications, especially if the speaker is halting or dull" (Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent: 1997 Lyman Beecher Lectures on Preaching*, Cowley Publications, Boston, Mass., 14).

When the gospel is preached in simplicity and in power, it is the most important thing that can happen anywhere, anytime. And that's what people want. As one man said to me, "I want my pastor to give me a message from God each week. When I go to church, I need a sermon, not a psychological talk." So keep your main focus on Jesus and His gospel. If you do, the people will love to come and listen.

Preach with passion, with enthusiasm. Ray Outland said, "The best sermons are preached on tiptoe."

Preach as though you believe what you say, as if eternity depends on it, because it does. Preach for a verdict. Close with an invitation that appeals to people to come to Christ.

Don't be intellectually lazy. You are a public speaker. If there is rust on your mind, it will soon be seen. No person can stay long in the pulpit who does not think and study. If you won't study, get out of the pulpit and find something else to do.

The purpose of a sermon is to inspire people's hearts and set them moving out to battle. If the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself/herself for battle? Don't be foggy-brained. Tell them at the beginning what you aim to do in the sermon, and then do it. The person who climbs into the pulpit and babbles aimlessly through a long series of meaningless and unrelated teachings is taking God's name in vain.

The worst thing that can be said about a minister's preaching is, "I don't know what he was driving at." If you can't make a sermon clear, go into some other work.

The beginning and the ending are the times when we are most likely to waste time. Be natural in your voice and gestures. Don't try to impress them with your knowledge. Your people are not interested in how Christians lived in the catacombs. They want to know how to live among their neighbors today. They are not interested in your Greek or Hebrew or what German scholars say. You need to know these things, but they don't. Just tell them what God says in a plain way. Tony Campolo has analyzed Billy Graham's sermons and said every fifth sentence is, "The Bible says . . ." That's one reason he is so effective.

Be normal, natural, and down-to-earth. Use good English. Forget about big words. Read widely but not so much that your reading keeps you from your people. Bal-

ance is important. We are sheep feeders, not sheep drivers. Sheep like to be fed; they never resist. When they are repeatedly fed, they will follow the shepherd where he leads them.

6

Build Fellowship

Building a warm and caring fellowship is essential to reviving a declining church. Every alive church, no matter its size, is happy, friendly, and loving. It is a real fellowship.

Friendships begin at the front door with the greeters. Some church ushers seem to be more interested in talking to one another than in greeting visitors and worshippers. Train them to greet people with a smile and a friendly “Hello,” and “How are you?” When they come in the door, hand them a bulletin. If ushers don’t know someone, have them ask, “Are you new here? May we help you?”

Have you been to Wal-Mart lately? They have greeters at the door to welcome you with a smile and to offer assistance in finding what you need. This practice helps, even if you don’t need help. Kristeen Bruum, a Catholic in Milwaukee, speaking along these lines said, “Wal-Mart does not have greeters at the door because the management is theologically committed to a culture of hospitality. They have them because they have figured out that people who feel welcome come back more often and spend more. I’d like to see us do at least as well as Wal-Mart in the hospitality department” (*Dallas Morning News*, September 18, 2004).

Have the people greet one another in the services. They may be reluctant to do so at first, but this can become an important part of the worship service.

Be warm and friendly with the people yourself. Before the service, move about the congregation and greet some of the people. You can't get to everyone, but they can see that you care about them. Your spirit will soon spread over the congregation.

Recently I visited a mega-church that averages 6,000 people in its three Sunday morning worship services. Before the service began, the pastor was in one of the aisles greeting visitors, hugging old friends, and obviously enjoying himself and the people. I said to myself as I watched him, "This is one reason he has such a great church and is so beloved as a pastor. He is among the people, not aloft from them. He enjoys them and they enjoy him."

Help the people laugh again. Laughter is a sign of life. Give them a chance to speak a word of thanks or praise, or to voice their concerns as you pray together. Create harmony and goodwill. The devil delights in spreading confusion and setting people at odds. He is behind every broken and divided church. Pray for your enemies. Pray for those with whom you are at odds.

The church in civil war never prospers. Love your people. Brag on them. Encourage them. Keep harmony in the church. People have enough trouble in their lives without the church adding to it. Be kind to everyone, because everyone is having a hard time.

The fellowship of the church is fragile. It can be divided quickly and more deeply over a pastor than anyone or anything else. A wise and discerning pastor will not let the people be divided over him/her or some issue he/she may propose. It is better to back off of an issue or proposal than to break up the church.

Never push an issue that makes people choose between you and their neighbors. Pastors come and go, but the people have to stay. They must live with one another and see each other on the streets and at the post office. They often have close family ties. If they have to choose between

you and one another, you most likely will lose.

Save yourself and the church much trouble by having timely conversations with key people in the church on key issues. Dale Jones, a layman, recently spoke in Truett's chapel service on the subject of "What a Layman Expects of His Pastor." He served in the Air Force and then with an oil company, so he moved often and had nineteen different pastors over the years. One thing he said that he expected from his pastor was the humility to acknowledge that God can speak to people and give vision to people other than the pastor, and further, he wanted his pastor to be honest enough to admit his mistakes.

An elderly pastor said to me, "Stay humble so you won't stumble." A humble spirit in the pastor helps make for a happy congregation, and a happy congregation is essential for life and vitality.

7

Go After the People

If you are going to revive a plateaued or declining church, you need to ring doorbells as well as church bells. Any pastor who will give himself to visitation will see the church grow. People can be reached but we must go after them.

The unofficial motto of my last church was “Off your seat, on your feet, and in the street.” Always visit people who visit you. Do it the same week they visit your church. Go into your neighborhood, two by two, and visit every house and apartment within several blocks of your church. Set weekly visitation goals for yourself. If you can’t get anyone else to go with you, go by yourself. Determine that even if no one else does what he ought to do, you will. As members see your example and as word gets around, others will be more likely to join you. Even if they don’t, you will be true to your calling.

Go after all people regardless of their race, class, or economic condition. All people matter to God, and everyone for whom Christ died should feel wanted and welcomed. Robert E. Webber in *Ancient-Future Evangelism* said that the number one reason the early church grew so fast was because “they were open to everyone.”

Start next door to the church and visit the people who live there. Then ask for the names of people who are next door and go there. The worse the weather, the better the

time is to visit. When it is snowing, sleeting, or raining, go visiting. That's when you are most likely to find prospects at home.

If you can enlist people to go visiting with you, mark off areas of the community and assign them to teams. Come back to the church after visitation for coffee and dessert and reporting. You may not have great success stories or a sudden influx of people clamoring to join, but you can meet the needs of lonely people, and you will make contacts so that when people have needs, they will think of you. Besides, the word will get around that a new day has come to your church.

If possible, leave something with the people to remind them of your visit—perhaps a marked New Testament.

Have home fellowships and invite prospects to your home for dinner. Ask your people to do the same thing. Ask your people to invite prospects into their homes for coffee, or perhaps dinner, on a neighborhood basis.

The benefits of this kind of visitation are untold:

- You will win some people to the Lord.
- You will discover new prospects.
- You will plant seeds for a later harvest.
- You will encourage some people to begin attending their own church again.
- You will build goodwill in the community.
- You will establish relationships with unchurched people who will call you later when they have special needs such as a wedding in the family, a death in the family, or a child in trouble.
- You will understand the community better.
- You will set an example for your people to make them proud that you are their pastor.
- You will be blessed and revived yourself.
- God will bless your efforts.

8

Have Special Projects

To revive and renew a church, you must begin some new projects. You can't keep doing the same things over and over. Variety piques interest and creates excitement. As someone has said, "If you keep doing what you have always done, you'll keep getting what you've always gotten." Here are some projects to consider:

- ✓ Begin a noontime Bible study for businesspeople at the church or at a nearby restaurant one day each week. Eat from 12:00 - 12:15. Have Bible study from 12:15 - 12:45. Let them out at 12:45.
- ✓ Have a fish fry, wild-game supper, or BBQ for men and invite special speakers. Have them invite friends and prospects.
- ✓ Improve your buildings and grounds. This is one of the quickest ways to show the change and progress taking place in your church, and it can usually be done without a great deal of dissension or discussion. Paint the building. Replace worn-out carpet. Put cushions on the pews. Improve the lighting system. Landscape the grounds. Put up a new sign. Well-kept buildings and grounds send a silent message that, "Someone cares." It sends a visual message to the church members and to the community-at-large about the pride and the class of the church.
- ✓ Start a discipleship group. Select a few men or

couples and invest some of your time in training them. Handpick them. That's what Jesus did. He never asked for volunteers. Part of the role of the pastor is to identify and develop leaders, not just do all the work himself/herself. You can meet in your home, in their home, or at a local restaurant. You can meet for breakfast, lunch, or dinner depending on their availability. Spend time with them. Go hunting and fishing with them. Golf with them. Just spend time with them.

- ✓ Start a nursing home ministry. Ask the director at the local nursing home if you can conduct Sunday afternoon worship services. If services are not already being conducted, the people will welcome you. The nurses and directors will be happy to gather people in the central meeting room. Forty-six percent (46%) of nursing home residents have no living children and more than half have no close relatives. The sad fact is that two-thirds of all nursing home residents have no regular visitors at all (*Christianity Today*, September 2004, 60).
- ✓ Have a tent revival meeting. A tent is its own publicity. It will draw crowds with a response that you could never get inside a church building.
- ✓ Start a jail ministry. The United States has 5% of the world's population, and 25% of the world's prison population (Fox News, Sept. 15, 2004). One out of every seventy-five men in America is in prison (*Tyler Morning Telegraph*, May 29, 2004), and according to a district attorney, 90% of the people in prison never receive a visit from anyone. Jails and prisons may be the greatest mission field there is in America today. Ask the local sheriff if you can hold services in the jail on Sunday afternoons. Many of these people are on their way to prison for the first time. Take a few laypersons with you. If

someone plays the guitar, let him/her lead the group in singing old hymns, and then share a brief message of salvation. Some will listen and respond, and you will be blessed, even if no one else is.

- ✓ Baptize outside in a river or a nearby lake. Many people have never seen a baptism outside the church building. This kind of service will attract visitors and create excitement.
- ✓ Have an all-church picnic on Sunday afternoon at the park. Have games and contests. Set up a portable PA system for worship. Let people bring lawn chairs or blankets to sit on.
- ✓ Have a homecoming. Let it commemorate the founding of the church. Honor the charter members of the congregation. Invite people to come back and celebrate with you.
- ✓ Have a revival and invite former pastors to preach each night. Each one of them is the favorite preacher of some member of the congregation. Each of those pastors married certain people, buried certain people, and baptized certain people in the congregation. They will have special ties to different members of your congregation. Your people will rejoice in seeing them again and hearing them again.
- ✓ Erect a basketball goal, build a volleyball court, and have Friday night recreation for youth and/or for couples. Encourage them to invite their friends who do not attend church. You will develop good relationships with your people and establish new relationships with prospects. Many people never know the preacher outside the pulpit. Once they learn that you are a fun-loving, normal part of the human race, they will likely come to hear you preach.
- ✓ Have Sunday night gatherings following the

evening service. Have homemade ice cream, watermelon, pies and cakes, and coffee, and bring people together for a good time. When people enjoy one another and love one another, the church comes alive. The pastor can create opportunities for such activities to take place.

- ✓ Set a high-attendance day. Encourage each class to reach 100% of their enrollment. Have the highest attendance in the history of the church. This can encourage the church that may have been down, discouraged, or defeated for years. Anything that can be done to show progress and achievement will help to encourage them.

Variety is not only the spice of life, it is the essence of life. So do some new things and the church will come to new life.

9

Minister to the Community

A revived, revitalized church will have a renewed concern for its community. It will start a food pantry to feed the hungry, serve a noon meal at the church to feed hungry people, set up a clothes closet to provide good used clothing for the poor and the needy; it will do something to fulfill the teaching of Jesus, “Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these, you have done it unto me” (Matt. 25:40).

You will find that working with the homeless and poor people is messy work. The people will be odorous and they will be different from you, but they are among “the least of these” whom Jesus spoke about. You will get ripped off. I’ve been ripped off more times than the local convenience store, but it is important to reach out to such people. Jesus did.

Be involved in missions. Get involved in missions locally. Consider starting a mission, perhaps an Hispanic, Black or Asian mission in your community. According to the latest Census Bureau report, white non-Hispanics are no longer the majority in Texas for the first time ever since the 1800s. Hispanics make up 35.3% of the population, Blacks comprise 10.8%, and Asian-Americans account for about 4%. (*Tyler Morning Telegraph*, August 27, 2004). These people need the gospel and perhaps a church of their own,

so help them. Don't spend all the money you take in on yourself. Nothing can revive a church like getting outside itself and helping others.

In addition, get involved in missions beyond your local community. Take your people on a mission trip, perhaps to Mexico, to build a church, conduct Vacation Bible Schools, etc. Let your people see the power of the gospel when it is preached to people who are not gospel-hardened. Let them see the dedication and sacrifices of Christian people in third-world countries. When they return home they will be different people, and your church will be different. This may be the quickest way to awaken and revive a declining church.

If you don't have the people, the leadership or the resources, take a mission trip by yourself. Join with other churches in your association or the state convention and go with them. Such a cooperative effort could prove to be a double blessing.

10

Use Common Sense

A lot of recovery comes down to just plain hard work and common sense. Things like:

Work Hard

Laziness can be our undoing. Ministers don't have to punch a time clock; we don't have to report to a superior; we don't have visitation quotas. We control our own schedules. There is a danger that we will sleep late, take long coffee breaks, go home early, and while away the hours instead of working diligently at the work of ministering. So develop a daily and weekly work schedule. Set visitation goals for yourself. You won't be able to keep the schedule perfectly or meet every goal exactly, but you'll get closer than if you don't try.

There is no substitute for hard work; on the other hand, hard work will make up for almost every other deficiency that you may have. You don't have to have the keenest mind or the most eloquent voice to do great things for God. If you will work harder than other people, you will probably accomplish more for God. That's what the Apostle Paul said he did (1 Corinthians 15:10). Hard work was one of the hallmarks of his ministry (2 Corinthians 11:23; Colossians 1:29; 1 Timothy 4:10). It should be one of yours, also.

Know Your Mission

Having a sense of mission, i.e., that the church exists for a great purpose, is essential to that church being vibrant and alive. When a church loses its sense of mission, it begins to die. It may continue to meet and it may have all the outward signs of life, but for all practical purposes, spiritual rigor mortis has begun. So, lead your church to rediscover or renew its commitment to the mission Christ gave it, i.e., to being His body here on earth and to carrying the Gospel to all people everywhere.

There is always the danger that a church, especially an older one, might let the organization become more important than the cause. So we must keep the mission clear in our own minds and clear before the church.

Jesus said, "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10), and "The Son of Man is come not to be ministered unto, but to minister and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Then He added, "As my father has sent me, even so send I you" (John 20:21). His mission is now our mission. We must never lose sight of that, nor let our churches drift from it.

Be An Historian

Know the culture, the history, and the traditions of your church, and respect them. Dale Jones, whom I mentioned earlier, speaking to Truett Seminary chapel on the subject of "What a Layman Expects of His Pastor" said, "I want him to learn quickly how we do things around here. Every church has its process as to how things are to be done, and he needs to fit in, at least at the beginning." Learn what the church's processes and traditions are and honor them. Holding to traditions is not necessarily living in the past; it is often preserving what is best for the future.

If you change too much too soon, it is like saying, "You were all wrong until I got here." People resent that. Be

especially careful about rapid change in worship style. Seek wise counsel and church approval before making any significant changes.

Know Your Community

Be involved in the community. Get to know your fellow pastors and speak well of them. When God was passing out grace and his calling, he didn't discriminate by race or denomination. He has people who are not in your church or denomination who serve him faithfully (Luke 9:49-50).

If you're in a small community, visit regularly the gathering places—the coffee shop where people meet, sports events, etc. Sit and talk with them. Get to know them. Be interested in the things they are interested in. Be a part of the community. They will notice that and will appreciate it.

Chart the past growth of your community and your church. Record the ten-year growth of your Sunday School, gifts, baptisms, and additions. You can get this information from your associational minutes, which are usually available through the associational office. This will help the people to see the progress of the church or the decline of the church over recent years.

Study your community also. As you do, you may discover that you need a singles ministry, an ethnic mission, or new Sunday classes. Your state Baptist convention office can give you a profile of your community from the latest census that shows such things.

Have Class

Do everything you do properly, in good taste, with dignity, in a way that your people can be proud of. A congregation is at the mercy of the preacher who has poor judgment, bad taste, a coarse nature, a brunted conscience, sloppy dress, and a fatal gift for saying and doing the wrong

thing. There is no place for these things in God's work. After all, we represent the King.

No one is ever embarrassed when you dress well, use good English, show good manners, lead the worship service in an orderly and dignified way, and keep the buildings and grounds in good repair. To the contrary, the people will be proud or, at least, feel good about it.

Start the worship services on time and end them at a reasonable time. See that the church is neat and clean, even if you have to pick up paper or remove trash yourself. Check the building and grounds regularly and encourage the people to have pride in the appearance of the buildings. The church is a physical monument to the spiritual presence of Christ. It needs to represent Him well.

Always dress for success. Wear a suit with matching socks and tie to the pulpit. Keep both feet flat on the floor when on the platform. Keep your coat buttoned. Be well groomed. You don't have to have a lot of clothes — just keep them cleaned and pressed. Look and act like a professional. That is what you are.

Express Gratitude

When your people do things for you, no matter how small, thank them. Keep a good supply of thank-you notes and use them regularly. It takes just a minute to express your appreciation for a kindness, and it will leave a lasting impression. George W. Truett, at the invitation of Woodrow Wilson, spent six months in Europe during WWI ministering to the troops. He often worked eighteen hour days, preaching as many as six times a day to as many as 15,000 men a day, but he still found time at the end of the day to write a personal note to the families of every Texas boy he met. As you can imagine, this endeared him to those families forever, and they told everyone they knew. It will be the same with you and your people.

Years ago, when Rudyard Kipling was at the height of his popularity, it was said that he was paid twenty-five cents for every word he wrote. Some speculative person wrote him a letter with twenty-five cents enclosed and said, "Send me one of your best words." Kipling responded with a one-word note, "Thanks." That will be one of your best words, also.

Do Your Duty

One of the greatest witnesses to the living Christ is a church that is vibrant, dynamic, and alive. The church is the body of Christ. How can we proclaim that Christ, the head of the church, is alive and well if the church, His body, is dull and dead? The work of reviving declining and plateaued churches is vital to the kingdom and deserves our best.

Outside the old courthouse in Vicksburg, Mississippi, there is a plaque about Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States during the Civil War. It reads, "He stepped up to do his duty in a world of action." That's what we must do—step up and do our duty to Christ and His church.

To sum it up, the key to reviving a declining and plateaued church is this: Love the Lord with all your heart, love the people unconditionally, preach the Word, work hard, and it will happen.

PART II

Marks of a Spirit-Filled Church

1

Believing:

Just Give Them Jesus
Acts 2: 22-24; 32-39

Mother Teresa was speaking to persons who had come to meet her from all over the world. Among the people to whom she spoke was a group of religious sisters from many North American orders. After her talk, she asked if there were any questions.

"Yes, I have one," a woman sitting near the front said. "As you know, most of the orders represented here have been losing members. It seems that more and more women are leaving all the time. And yet your order is attracting thousands upon thousands. What do you do?"

Without hesitating Mother Teresa answered, "I give them Jesus."

"Yes, I know," said the woman, "but take habits, for example. Do your women object to wearing habits? And the rules of the order, how do you do it?"

"I give them Jesus," Mother Teresa replied.

"Yes, I know Mother," said the woman, "but can you be more specific?"

"I give them Jesus," Mother Teresa repeated again.

"Mother," said the woman, "we are all aware of your fine work. I want to know about something else."

Mother Teresa said quietly, "I give them Jesus. There is nothing else."

That's what the New Testament church did. It gave

people Jesus. To them there was nothing else.

That first church was a Spirit-filled. It was formed and filled by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. It had a powerful impact both on individuals and on society. The early Christians turned their world upside down morally, socially, and spiritually. It was marked by five things: It was a believing church, a learning church, a fellowshiping church, a worshiping church, and a witnessing church.

However, the truth the church held above all else was Jesus—the Jesus of prophecy, the Jesus of history, the Jesus of experience. He was the object of their faith and the subject of their preaching. They kept the spotlight on him. Sixty-eight times in the book of Acts, an average of two and a half times per chapter the name of Jesus is mentioned. He was the center and circumference of their lives. They were not yet into book reviews, religious entertainment, or ten steps to successful living.

We need Spirit-filled churches today. It's the only kind of church that can meet our needs and change our world. A Spirit-filled church is not marked by a spiritual spasm or a holy hand wave throughout the congregation. It is marked by an emphasis on Jesus. If we want what the early Christians had, we've got to do what they did—put the focus back on Jesus—not on the preacher, not on the music, not on the program, but on Jesus. In our personal lives, in our preaching, in our teaching, and in our program, He must be magnified. The spotlight must be on Him.

What did the New Testament church believe about Jesus? It can be seen in the first sermon preached at Pentecost. There were five things clearly set out in Acts 2: 22-24; 32-39:

- He lived a life approved by God.
- He died a death ordained by God.
- He was raised from the dead by the power of God.
- He was exalted to the right hand of God.

- He can be experienced through the Spirit of God.

The Teacher Come from God

First, Jesus lived a life approved by God (vs. 22). How did God show his approval of Jesus? By signs, wonders, and miracles. Nicodemus, the ruler of the Jews who came to Jesus by night, summed it up when he said, “Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” (John 3:2). Nicodemus saw Jesus’ miracles as evidence that God’s hand was on him.

Miracles trip a lot of people because they do not understand them. Miracles are an act of God, and a God who can’t perform miracles would not be much of a God. There are two things we need to understand about miracles in the Bible:

- Not all of God’s people did miracles. Only a few people did them. The vast majority of Bible characters, even faithful people of God, did no miracles. Moses did miracles; Elisha did miracles; the Apostles did miracles; and, of course, Jesus did miracles. But Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph did no miracles. None of the kings—Saul, David or Solomon—did miracles. The fact is that most of the people in the Bible did no miracles.
- Miracles did not occur all the time. They came only occasionally and in clusters. Usually they marked new beginnings. They were God’s stamp of approval on the individuals or events. For example, there were many miracles surrounding the Exodus. God sent the plagues on Egypt; He parted the waters of the Red Sea. He sent quail and manna from heaven to feed the people during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, and during these years their clothes did not wear out and their feet

did not swell (Nehemiah 9:21). But as soon as they entered the Promised Land, the miracles ceased and they had to plough the ground, plant seeds, and pray for rain in order to have food. His people were in the Promised Land and life returned to normal. Many miracles were done by the apostles, but the further you go into the book of Acts, the fewer miracles you find.

The greatest of all miracle workers was Jesus himself. He made the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, and the dead to return to life. He spoke to the winds and waves, and they obeyed Him. He walked on water. He multiplied the fish and the loaves. As historian H.G. Wells said, "He was a prophet of unprecedented power." But, He never performed miracles to impress or please the multitudes. He did them out of compassion and to meet human needs. They were God's way of saying again and again, "This is my beloved son, hear ye him."

The Eternal Plan of God

Second, Jesus died a death ordained by God (vs. 23). His death was both pre-determined and foreknown by God. That is, it was not an accident and it was not a surprise to God. It was a part of God's eternal plan. Yet when Peter preached the sermon, he accused his listeners of crucifying Jesus. They were a part of the mob who, a few weeks earlier, had attended the trial of Jesus and shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

The philosopher Cicero said crucifixion was "the most cruel and hideous of punishments." Others called it "the extreme penalty." As such, Rome reserved it for the worst elements of society: murderers, revolutionaries, and slaves.

Now Peter said to them, "You murdered Jesus like a common criminal." I don't know how to harmonize the fact that Jesus' death was foreknown and predetermined

by God and the fact that these people were responsible for his death. However, the point I think that needs to be made is that they, by their cruel act, did not thwart the purposes of God. This was a part of his eternal plan.

Who killed Jesus? Roman soldiers did the nasty work of arresting, taunting, scourging, and crucifying Jesus. The religious leaders of that day and a minority of the Jewish population clamored for it, but Jesus accepted responsibility for his own death. He said, "I lay down my life...no man takes it from me. I lay it down myself" (John 10:18). Jesus foresaw His death as fulfilling His mission in the world, and He moved toward the conflict that precipitated His death. The truth is—we killed Jesus. He died because of sin. His blood is on our hands. The scriptures agree. John said that Jesus was the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 3:8).

The prophet Isaiah, 700 years before the event, looked ahead and spoke of the coming Messiah's suffering and death as though it had already happened. He said, "He *was* wounded for our transgressions, he *was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him; and by his stripes we are healed. All we, like sheep, have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:5-6).

It has been said, "There are two great moments in a person's life: the first is when you are born, the second is when you discover why you were born." From the earliest days, Jesus knew why He was born; He was born to die. He lived His life under the shadow of the cross.

There is a painting of Jesus that I like. I don't know who the artist was, but it pictures Jesus as a boy working in His father's carpenter shop in Nazareth. As He stands by the workbench, a beam of sunlight strikes Him and casts a shadow against the wall behind Him. It is the shadow of a cross.

I do not know when He first realized that He was born to die for the sins of the world, but it was long before it happened. Repeatedly, He told his disciples that He *must* go to Jerusalem where he would be betrayed by sinful men, crucified, and raised from the dead on the third day (Mark 8:31; 9:31). As the end neared, the scriptures say that He steadfastly set his face toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). He knew what would happen there, but He had to go. He was under divine mandate.

One-fourth to one-third of each of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, is devoted to the last seven days of Jesus' life. The very amount of space devoted to His death helps us understand why He came. He came to die.

Look at the Evidence

Third, Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of God (vs. 32). This was the central message concerning Jesus. Thirty times in the book of Acts, we are told that Jesus was "raised" or "resurrected." The word "raised" means "to stand again." The word "resurrection" means "to bring to new life." The disciples took Jesus' dead body from the cross, laid it in Joseph's tomb, and three days later God made Him stand up again. He brought Him to new life.

This was the hard part for everyone to believe. When Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary brought word to the Apostles that Jesus was raised from the dead, "their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not" (Luke 24:10-11).

When Paul preached in Athens, he began with natural religion. He told how God had created all things and made of one blood all people of the earth. The philosophers of that day had no problem with that, but when he declared that Jesus had been raised from the dead, they laughed

him to scorn. When he gave testimony to Festus, the Roman Governor, concerning the resurrection, Festus said Paul was crazy (Acts 26:24).

Those ancient people had never watched television, talked on a cell phone, or flown in an airplane, but they did know that dead people do not come to life again. To convince them otherwise was not an easy chore. They believed only after seeing Him repeatedly with their two eyes. They had to have infallible proof.

How can we be sure of the resurrection today? What proof do we have? Why should we, or anyone else for that matter, believe it? The resurrection cannot be proved or disproved today. If it were going to be disproved, it would had to have been done in that day. And if someone had brought forth proof that Jesus was not raised from the dead, the Christian movement would have dispersed in confusion. While we cannot prove or disprove the resurrection, we can look at evidences of it. Here are three:

- The testimony of eyewitnesses. Peter declared concerning the resurrection, “therefore we all are witnesses,” and today, we have a written record of their eyewitness account. What shall we say of this kind of evidence? It is the highest kind. It is the same kind of evidence we have used to establish anything historically, and it is the same kind of evidence we use to establish things legally.

There are people today who say that the Holocaust never happened. They say it is a fictitious story made up by the Jews. How do we know that the Holocaust really happened? The same way we know anything historically—by eyewitnesses who record the events for us. That’s the kind of evidence we have of the resurrection.

We establish things legally the same way. If there was a murder in town last night, one of the first things the police want answered is this

question: “Did anybody see it?” Then, “Were there other witnesses?” Then the district attorney builds his case on the number, agreement, and reliability of the witnesses. Daily, people are sent to prison for life or sentenced to death on the testimony of eyewitnesses.

- The evidence of changed lives: When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, the disciples fled into the night like scared rabbits. Simon Peter, when questioned about his association with Jesus, denied knowing him. But later something happened to these disciples. They would be threatened, beaten, jailed, and even killed for their faith in Jesus, and they would not deny Him. They kept maintaining even in the face of severe persecution that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Ordinary people do not die for a lie. Surely someone would have cracked. That happens all the time. In the recent Enron scandal (January 2004), the Chief Financial Officer, Andrew Fostow, and his wife both confessed under the threat of long prison terms to what they at first denied. Then they gave testimony to implicate other people in the company. Under the pressure of jail and fines, they broke. The disciples would have done that had Jesus’ resurrection not been the truth.
- The evidence of the Christian movement. From this event flowed the greatest social and spiritual revolution in the history of the world. Untold good has come from the Christian movement through the centuries in the form of hospitals, orphanages, schools, women’s rights, and morality. If Jesus was not raised from the dead, then Christianity is not true, and if Christianity is not true, a lie has done more good in the world than the truth has.

In John Masfield’s masterful work, *Pontius Pilate*, the

centurion of the Roman force commanding the crucifixion of Jesus, makes his report to Pilate. Procula, Pilate's wife, asks the Roman captain, "Do you think Christ is really dead?"

"No, my lady, I don't," was the centurion's reply.

"Where is he?" she inquired.

"Out in the world," the centurion responded, "where neither Jew, Roman, nor sinner can ever stop Him."

Jesus is alive and loose. You can believe that with confidence. The evidence is overwhelming.

Kneel to Jesus.

Fourth, Jesus was exalted to the right hand of God. God made Him both Lord and Christ (vs. 36). The Greek word translated "Lord" means "master, the supreme authority." The word "Christ" means "Messiah." These events declare that Jesus is both Master and Messiah.

The confession "Jesus is Lord" is the initial confession of a Christian. The scriptures say, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Romans 10: 9-10).

It is also the eventual confession of all creation. Again, the scriptures declare, "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth; and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11).

Religion was being introduced into the recent presidential campaign (2004) as never before. One presidential candidate said that he admired Jesus because of His example. Another said that Jesus was his favorite philosopher. But Jesus is more than an example and more than a

philosopher. He is not just to be admired, respected, or studied. He is to be worshipped, obeyed, and followed. He is both Lord and Savior.

Jim Denison tells of receiving a Christmas card that portrayed various conquerors across human history on the cover: Genghis Kahn, Ivan the Terrible, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, and so on. The caption read: "History is filled with men who would be god." Then the card opens to a picture of Mary holding the infant Jesus and the caption, "But only one God who would be man."

Jesus was man enough to ask the woman at the well for a cup of water, but divine enough to offer her the living water. He was human enough to attend a wedding at Canaan of Galilee, but divine enough to turn the water into wine. He was man enough to go to sleep on a boat, but divine enough to still the waters when He was awakened. He was human enough to weep and pray for Lazarus, but divine enough to raise Lazarus from the dead. He was human enough to cry on the cross, "I thirst!" but divine enough to say to the thief, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." He was human enough to die, but divine enough to be raised from the dead on the third day. He was, and is, the Son of God—the Master and the Messiah, and we ought to kneel before him.

When Richmond was taken by General Sherman, Abraham Lincoln arrived and rode through the streets on a horse. As he rode down the street, former slaves bowed and knelt before him. Lincoln was embarrassed and said to them, "Don't kneel to me. Kneel only to God. He is the one who set you free." Jesus is our Savior. He is the one before whom we bow.

Crown Him or Crucify Him?

Finally, Jesus can be experienced by the Spirit of God (verses 37-39). Those who heard Peter's sermon were

“pricked” in their hearts. They were convicted by the Spirit of God and asked, “What shall we do?” They knew that if this was true, they had to respond. So do we.

Early in Abraham Lincoln’s political career, he ran for Congress. According to William McKenzie, an editorial columnist, Lincoln was sitting in church one Sunday when the minister asked his congregation who among them was going to heaven. The future president sat silently. When he asked who was going to hell, Mr. Lincoln remained still. Finally, the parson directly asked Mr. Lincoln where he was going, and Lincoln responded, “I’m going to Congress” (McKenzie, *Dallas Morning News*, 12 Jan. 2004).

We can’t forever sit. Sooner or later, we have to take a stand. There is no third option. What will it be for you: “crucify him” or “deify him?”

Peter tells his listeners and he tells us what to do. Repent and be baptized. The word “repent” means “to turn.” It means to change your mind and change your life. I don’t think he was referring to some moral sin, such as drunkenness, adultery, or stealing. A person can turn from all those things and still not be right with God. I think Peter referenced the greatest of all sins—the rejection of Christ. He was saying, in essence, “you must change your mind about Jesus. Whereas a few weeks ago, you shouted, ‘Crucify him!’ you must now bow before him as Lord.”

Then we should be baptized as an outward sign of an inward commitment. It is like the wedding ring a married person wears on his/her finger. It does not make a person married. Remove it, and the couple is still married. Put it on a child and it does not make the child married. It is, rather, an outward sign of the inward commitment that does make one married. Baptism is to our Christian life what a wedding ring is to the married life—an outward sign of an inward commitment.

When we repent and obey, two wonderful things happen. First, our sins are forgiven. Mark Twain said, “Every

man is a moon, and has a dark side he never shows to anybody.” Forgiveness covers our dark side, also. Second, Jesus himself comes into our lives by the Holy Spirit. Then you experience Christ for yourself. If we repent and turn to Christ, He will come to us (Acts 3:19). Jesus promised, “I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you...I will be with you and in you” (John 14:16-21).

Jesus is not just to be studied; He is to be experienced. How can we know that He lives? He lives within our hearts. That is a promise to us and for all the ages to come.

The question, “What shall we do?” is the same question Pilate asked at the trial of Jesus. He said, “What shall I do with Jesus which is called the Christ?” (Matthew 27:22). Then it was asked of the crowds. Now it is being asked by them. Things have certainly changed. The options are still the same: accept him or reject him. Crown him or crucify him. What will you do?

2

Learning:

Keep On Keeping On
Text: Acts 2:41-42

Abraham Lincoln and his family, though not members, faithfully attended the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington D.C. while he was president. At the height of the Civil War, the pastor announced that the building was being requisitioned by Secretary of War Stanton for the care of wounded soldiers, and worship would be suspended. Lincoln stood to his feet and said, “Dr. Gurley, we are too much in need of this church in these days. We cannot let it close. I countermand the order.”

If ever there was a day when we needed the church, it is today, but we need the church alive and well. We need the church to be the church.

There are different kinds of churches. There are mausoleum churches; a mausoleum is a resting place for the dead. There are museum churches; a museum is a preserver of the past. And there are coliseum churches; a coliseum is an entertainment center for spectators. What we need today are not mausoleum churches or museum churches or coliseum churches, but Spirit-filled churches.

The scriptures give us a glimpse of a Spirit-filled church in Acts 2:41-42. As mentioned previously, the marks of a Spirit-filled church set out in this passage are as follows: a believing church, a learning church, a fellowshiping church, a worshiping church, and a witnessing church.

First and foremost, it is a believing church. What did they believe? In a word—Jesus. They believed in the Jesus of prophecy, the Jesus of history, and the Jesus of experience.

The second mark of a Spirit-filled church is very surprising. It is a learning church, a studying church. The scriptures say, “They continued steadfastly in the Apostle’s doctrine.” The word “continued” in the original Greek language means “to persevere,” “to stay at it,” “to keep on.” The word “steadfastly” is the very same Greek word. The scriptures are saying they continued continuing; they continued continually; they kept on keeping on, learning and living the words of the apostles.

After Pentecost, the Holy Spirit opened a school in Jerusalem and had 3,000 new believers enrolled in kindergarten, with the apostles as the faculty. The believers didn’t say that the Holy Spirit was the only teacher they needed. They needed what the Apostles had to say.

The Apostles were those who had accompanied Jesus since the baptism of John. Their assignment was to go into all the world and make disciples, and that’s what they did (Matthew 28:19-20).

The office of the apostle passed away with the death of the twelve, but their teachings remained. They have come down to us in a definitive form in the New Testament.

That church had a tremendous impact. It changed individual lives and revolutionized society. If we want what they had, then we’ve got to do what they did. We must continue steadfastly in the Apostle’s doctrine. But how do we do that? How do we devote ourselves to the Apostle’s doctrine today? By humbly submitting to the teachings of the Bible. The mark of a Spirit-filled church is that it keeps on learning and living the teachings of scripture. It is not doing the religious wave, hiring a praise team, or having the religious rigors. It is deep, serious Bible study. So if we want to be a Spirit-filled church, we must return to the

Bible. We must preach it from the pulpit, teach it in the classrooms, believe it in the pew, and live it in the streets.

Our beliefs and values come from culture or from scripture. Unless we preach and teach the scriptures in the church, unless we study them on our own, our beliefs and values will be shaped more by culture than by Christ.

Last year Jack Whittaker, a West Virginia contractor, won the richest unlimited jackpot in U.S. history, 314.9 million dollars. When he won, he announced that he was going to donate ten percent of his winnings to his church. The next time I read about Jack Whittaker, he had been drugged and robbed of \$500,000 by the owner of a strip club that he frequents (*Dallas Morning News*, 25 Dec. 2003). How do you harmonize giving a tithe to the church and frequenting a strip club? Not from studying the scriptures.

A lady wrote to Ann Landers that she was a devout Christian, prominent in her church with an impeccable reputation, but because of an unhappy marriage, she had been involved in an affair with a married man. How do you harmonize being a devout Christian and living in an adulterous relationship? Not from studying the scriptures.

Recently, the A&E television network featured the biography of the founder of Home Depot (Nov. 26, 2003). It said that he was a devout Roman Catholic, but cursed like a sailor. How do you harmonize being a devout Roman Catholic and having a filthy mouth? Not from studying the scriptures.

Three leading political candidates in a recent campaign (2004) endorsed the Massachusetts state law legalizing same sex marriages. Someone called them "Cafeteria Catholics." Like people in a cafeteria line, they pick and choose what they want and leave the rest. There are a lot of cafeteria Baptists also, but that really is not an option. The scriptures are either all-important or of no importance at all.

It appears as though it's either back to the Bible or back

to the jungle. The mark of the Spirit-filled church is humble submission to the Apostle's teaching, but how do we do that practically? There are three ways:

- We must stow it in our hearts.
- We must show it in our lives.
- We must sow it in the world.

What Would Jesus Do?

First, we must stow it within our hearts. The Psalmist said, "Thy word have I hid in mine heart that I might not sin against thee" (Psalm 119:11). That's what Jesus did. Following His baptism, He was led into the wilderness to be tempted. After fasting for 40 days, Satan appeared and encouraged him to turn stones into bread, to cast himself from the pinnacle of the temple, and to worship him.

To every temptation, Jesus responded, "It is written..." and then quoted a passage from the Old Testament that guided Him in what to do. He had the answers He needed because as a lad in the synagogue school in Nazareth, He had stowed God's word in His heart.

Bracelets with the letters "WWJD" are very popular these days. The letters stand for "What Would Jesus Do?" But we can't do what Jesus would do unless we know what Jesus did. That makes studying the scriptures imperative.

The Bereans are examples for us. Luke said of them, "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11).

The word "noble" literally means "liberal," i.e., open-minded, receptive to new truth. It's good to be open-minded, just so long as you're not so open-minded that your brain falls out. The only purpose of being open-minded is to ultimately close your mind around the truth.

The scriptures were the church's final authority for

spiritual truth, and they need to be ours, also. To that end, they “searched the scriptures daily.” The word “searched” is used in the judicial sense, i.e., they scrutinized, investigated, and examined the scriptures to see if what Paul preached was true. That’s what we need to do.

Preachers need to proclaim the scriptures from the pulpit. That’s the way to build the church. It is also the way to fulfill our calling. Jesus said, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:16). We are sheep feeders, not sheep drivers. Sheep like to be fed. They never resist. When repeatedly fed, they will follow the shepherd’s lead. If pastors don’t preach and teach the scriptures, the church will soon mirror the world.

Hearing the preacher preach the scriptures is not enough. We must study them on our own. We must daily search the scriptures. The entertainment world—movies, television and music—is a vast wasteland. The plots all seem to be staged around the bathroom or the bedroom, and the language is crude, vulgar and offensive. If I had said the things that we hear on television nightly, my mother would have washed my mouth out with soap and my father would have knocked the suds out of me.

If we spend more time watching television and reading the newspaper than we do in studying the scriptures, then our views and our values will be determined more by the media than by the Master.

Adoniram and Ann Judson were our first Baptist missionaries from America. In 1812, they set sail for India under the auspices of the Congregational Church. They knew that once they arrived in India, they would confront English Baptist missionary William Carey and have to defend the congregational position of baptism by sprinkling rather than by immersion. So en route, they both began to study the scriptures in the original language. Adoniram Judson came to the conclusion that Baptists were right before his wife did. She, too, was proficient in Greek and

searched the scriptures and eventually came to the same conclusion. When they landed in India, they sought William Carey, asked him to baptize them, and became Baptists.

They gave up their affiliation with the Congregational Church, and Luther Rice, who had sailed on another ship and had come to the same conclusions, returned to the States to organize Baptists to support their first missionaries.

In her diary, Ann Judson wrote, “Oh, that the Spirit of God may enlighten and direct my mind—may prevent me from maintaining an old error, or embracing a new one.”

That’s what preaching the scriptures and personally studying the scriptures will do—it will keep you from maintaining an old error or embracing a new one.

Be Ye Doers of the Word

Second, show it in your life. James wrote, “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves” (James 1:22).

Another Apostle, Paul, said, “The things you have learned, received, heard, and seen of me, do” (Philippians 4:9). We are to learn, but we are also to live the scriptures. Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me...” (John 10:27).

Jim Pleitz tells of when the first little black boy wanted to join their church, when he was pastor of First Baptist Church, Pensacola, Florida. Jim knew there would be difficulties, so he went to some of the key men in his church to explain the situation and gain their support before the young man came forward. One man said to him, “Preacher, I know you’re right, but I don’t want to do right until I have to.” Well, if we’re going to be true to Jesus and the Apostle’s teachings, we have to do right.

Barry Camp told about a man who pulled up behind a

lady at a red light. She was talking on the cell phone and paid no attention to the light when it changed, so she sat there until it was too late to turn. The man, who was already late for an appointment, sat down on his horn, waved his hands in the air, yelled at the top of his voice, banged his hands on the steering wheel, and beat the dashboard. A policeman who had pulled up behind him, got out of his car, walked over to the man's car, tapped on the window and told him to get out. The man said, "What's the matter? You can't arrest me for waving my arms and yelling in my own car." The policeman said, "You just think I can't." He put handcuffs on the man, took him to the police station and put him in jail. A few hours later, he released the man. The man said, "I told you you couldn't hold me. What was the charge?"

The policeman said, "I saw that cross dangling from your rearview mirror. I saw the sign of the fish on your trunk. I saw the bumper sticker that said, 'Honk if you love Jesus' on your bumper and concluded you were driving a stolen car."

I heard about a highway patrolman who pulled a man over. The man realized he did not have his seatbelt on, so he quickly grabbed it, jerked it over him and buckled it. When the policeman stepped to the window, he said, "Do you always drive with your seatbelt buckled through your steering wheel?"

Paul Chance told me of the year the city of Jacksonville, Texas, was planning a Fourth of July fireworks display in the Tomato Bowl, their city stadium. The man in charge had no experience in fireworks displays, but decided that he knew enough about engineering to do it himself and save money. When he attempted to set off the fireworks display, it backfired, smutted his face, singed his eyebrows and hair, and blew him back about six feet.

A few days later, he was walking down the street, and a lady stopped him and said, "Aren't you the same man

who set off the fireworks display on July 4?" He said, "No ma'am, I'm not the same man and I never will be again."

Study this book, continue in the Apostle's doctrine, and you will never be the same again.

Find Your Own Way

Third, we must sow it in the world. Jesus commanded this when He said, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:19-20).

The word "nations" literally means all ethnicities, all cultures, all classes of people. That's our mission, and we must learn to do it one way or another.

You'll have to find your own way, but you can. Milton Cunningham shares an experience which he had that so aptly illustrates finding a way to sow God's word. Soon after Christmas, Milton was standing at a prescription counter waiting for the pharmacist to fill his order when an elderly lady behind him asked, "Did you have a nice Christmas?"

He replied, "Yes, I did. I hope you did, also."

She then said, "Do you like to read?"

Milton said, "Yes, I do."

She responded, "Would you like to read about John Wayne?"

"Yes, I would."

The lady handed him a tract about the conversion of John Wayne. This is what the tract said:

Robert Schuller's teenage daughter, Cindy, was in a motorcycle accident and had to have her leg amputated. John Wayne was a big fan of Robert Schuller. He heard Dr. Schuller tell of this on one of his programs, so he wrote a

note to her saying he was sorry to hear about her accident and hoped she would be all right.

The note was delivered to her, and she decided she wanted to write John Wayne a note in reply. She wrote, "Dear Mr. Wayne, I got your note. Thanks for writing to me. I like you very much. I am going to be all right because Jesus is going to help me. Mr. Wayne, do you know Jesus? I sure hope you know Jesus, Mr. Wayne, because I cannot imagine Heaven complete without John Wayne being there. I hope if you don't know Jesus, that you will give your heart to Jesus right now. See you in Heaven." And she signed her name.

She had just put that letter in an envelope, sealed it, and written across the front of it, "John Wayne," when a visitor came into her room to see her. He asked her what she was doing. She said, "I just wrote a letter to John Wayne, but I don't know how to get it to him." He said, "That's interesting. I am going to have dinner with John Wayne tonight at the Newport Club down at Newport Beach. Give it to me and I will give it to him." She gave him the letter, and he put it in his coat pocket.

There were twelve of them that night sitting around the table for dinner. They were laughing and joking when the man happened to reach into his pocket, felt that letter and remembered. John Wayne was seated at the end of the table, and the guy took out the letter and said, "Duke, I was in Schuller's daughter's room today, and she wrote you a letter and wanted me to give it to you. Here it is."

They passed it down to John Wayne and he opened it and read it. They kept on laughing and cutting up until someone happened to look down at John Wayne. He had tears in his eyes. One of them said, "Duke, what is the matter?"

He said, "I want to read you this letter." He read it, then folded it, put it in his pocket, and he pointed to the

man who delivered it to him and said, "You tell Cindy that right now, in this restaurant, John Wayne gives his heart to Jesus Christ and I will see her in heaven."

Three weeks later, John Wayne died.

Milton quickly read of John Wayne's conversion, and then the lady said, "Would you like to read my story?"

He replied, "Yes, I would." And she handed Milton another tract. By then, the pharmacist had filled his prescription and handed it to him, and he turned to walk away. As he walked away, he heard her say to the pharmacist, "Do you like to read?"

In the northwest several years ago, a preacher taught me a way to witness. When you are in a restaurant and a waiter or waitress comes to get your drink order, ask for his/her name and find out a little about the person. Then when your order is brought, reach out, touch the person and say, "Mary/Bill, we're going to have a prayer. Is there anything in your life you'd like for us to pray about?"

I've tried that for years and I have had all kinds of responses—all of them good. Just remember, if you do that, leave them a good tip. We need to be kind to everyone, because everyone is having a tough time. People need our compassion and our prayers.

There are many ways to witness. Find one that fits your personality and your lifestyle and do it. We must sow God's Word in the world.

Jesus is the centerpiece of the Apostle's doctrine. If you follow it to its end, it will eventually lead you to Him. Jesus said, "Ye search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life" (John 5:39-40).

Gordon MacDonald said, "The older I get, the more I realize that my soul mission is to bring people to Jesus and leave them there." That's what the Apostle's doctrine does,

and that's the work of a Spirit-filled church—to bring you to Jesus and leave you there.

3

Fellowshipping:

For the Work's Sake
Acts 2:41-42

Major W.E. Penn was considered by many to be Texas Baptists' greatest evangelist. Born in Tennessee, he was converted at the age of 15 and admitted to the bar to practice law at age 21. He joined the Confederate Army to fight in the Civil War and attained the rank of Major. Broken by the war, and especially by the two years spent in a prison camp, he moved to East Texas and settled in the town of Jefferson where he opened his law practice.

He became an interested and active layman serving the church as Sunday School superintendent. His outstanding abilities were soon noted, and he was called upon to deliver addresses to various denominational meetings on Sunday School work. In 1875 in one such meeting in Tyler, Pastor J.H. Stribling (the first ministerial student to graduate from Baylor University), asked him to stay after the meeting and speak to his church. Attendance grew nightly, and a revival broke out. He reluctantly consented to conduct the meeting, which lasted five weeks. Scores of people were saved; the church was revolutionized and revitalized in a marvelous way. News of the revival spread and soon invitations came from all over the state. The Major closed his law practice and entered evangelistic work permanently. He was the first man in Texas to do so. The first four years, he conducted revivals in brush arbor meetings.

Thereafter, he bought a tent, took his own singer with him, and for the next 20 years until his death, he preached hundreds of revival meetings and thousands (upwards to 13,000-14,000) of people came to know the Savior under his preaching (Leon McBeth, *The First Baptist Church of Dallas*, 52-54).

There were three conditions that had to be met before Major Penn would go to a church for a revival meeting:

- If the church was in debt, it had to pay off its debt.
- If anyone shouted in the services, they were to be investigated by a “shouting committee” to make sure they were living the Christian life. He didn’t want anyone shouting in the service who wasn’t living the Christian life.
- If there were conflicts in the church, they had to be resolved first.

Why this concern about conflict in the church? It is because the Holy Spirit cannot work effectively in the midst of conflict. When a congregation is at civil war, the work of the Holy Spirit is quenched. Until conflict is resolved, revival will tarry, but when the Holy Spirit comes, differences are resolved and unity is restored.

What we need today are more Spirit-filled churches. Fellowship is one of the marks of a Spirit-filled church. Acts 2:41-47 sets out the five marks of a Spirit-filled church: believing, studying, fellowshiping, worshipping, and witnessing.

As noted, the first mark of a Spirit-filled church is believing. “They that gladly received his words were baptized.” The word “received” means to welcome a person or believe a truth. What did they believe? In a word—Jesus. They believed in the Jesus of prophecy, of history, and of experience.

The second mark of a Spirit-filled church is learning. “They continued steadfastly in the Apostle’s doctrine.” They kept on keeping on, learning and living what the

Apostles preached and taught.

The third mark of a Spirit-filled church is fellowship.

The Greek word translated “fellowship” is *koinonia*. It means a partnership, to share in common. When the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost, He formed and filled the church, and it became a community of people who shared a common life. They shared a common belief in Jesus. They shared a common commitment to carrying the gospel to the ends of the earth. And they shared a common love for one another. The Holy Spirit created from a vast array of people that came from all over the Roman Empire a caring and sharing fellowship.

That church had a tremendous impact on its world. It changed individual lives, and it revolutionized society morally, socially, and spiritually. The critics said of them, “Those who have turned the world upside down have come here, also.”

If we want what they had, we’re going to have to do what they did. We are going to have to put the spotlight back on Jesus—not on the pastor, not on the choir, not on the program, but on Jesus. We are going to have to devote ourselves to studying the scriptures. They must preach them from the pulpit, teach them in the classrooms, believe them in the pews, and live them in the streets. And we’re going to have to work at building or keeping our fellowship.

The Holy Spirit is a great unifier. He brought the people together on the day of Pentecost and he continues to do that today. He creates fellowship in the church. He formed the fellowship. We can fracture it. He made it, but we can break it.

What are the marks of a Spirit-filled fellowship? It’s not doing the holy wave, or having a religious rigor, or doing the Saint Vitus dance in the aisles. It is characterized by three things:

- It is a caring fellowship.
- It is a sharing fellowship.
- It is a forbearing fellowship.

If You Scratch Deep Enough

First, we must build a caring fellowship. Gordon McDonald tells of having a doctor friend in New York City that he regularly met and prayed with. The doctor said when he went to work every day, he went with great aspirations that it would be a wonderful day, but by the end of the day, he found himself simply trying to survive. Then he said, "New York City can be a disabling place."

Your town/my town can be a disabling place also. Everywhere we turn, there is death, disease, disaster, divorce, deformity, depression and discouragement. There is loneliness, poverty, crime, abuse, and pornography. Life anywhere can be disabling.

The late Browning Ware said, "If you scratch anyone deep enough, you'll discover great pain." The church is here to scratch where people itch, to do what it can to help them in their pain.

We had a student at Truett Theological Seminary who was a native of Sierra Leone, which has been locked in a bloody civil war for 10 years. Liberia-backed rebels overran the capital city of Freetown in 1997. They killed more than a million people before the UN stepped in with peace-keeping forces that are still there today. They raped the women, hacked people to death with machetes, locked families in their homes and set them on fire, ripped open the stomachs of pregnant women while betting on whether the unborn child was a boy or a girl, and if you objected, they cut your tongue out.

The student said that they lived on things you could not imagine—lizards and roots. They fished at night, because if they fished in the daytime, the rebels took their

food from them.

He said, "In those days, the churches were our only hope. We could go there and get encouragement and strength to carry on in spite of our difficulties."

That was the kind of world the first century Christians lived in. They were threatened, beaten, imprisoned, and even put to death for their faith, but in the midst of all of that, they found strength and encouragement in their fellowship. They really cared for one another. They prayed for one another; they provided benevolent help for widows; they ministered to the sick; they wept for those who wept; they buried their dead; they risked their lives for one another. They helped the Apostle Paul escape over the walls of the city of Damascus. Later, they sent members of the church to minister to him and to give an offering to him while he was in prison in Rome. They did whatever they needed to do to help one another. That's what the church was and ought to be today.

We've Got Lots of Stuff

Second, we need to build a sharing fellowship. These early believers not only cared for one another, they shared with one another. Where there is no generosity, there is no fellowship.

Luke tells of this generosity in Acts 2:44-45, "They were together, they had all things in common" and "they sold their possessions and gave according to every man's need."

What is the application of this teaching? Must every Spirit-filled Christian follow the example literally? John R. Stott, in an article in *Christianity Today*, reminds us that Jesus does not call his disciples to total poverty. Christ and the disciples did own property. In the early Jerusalem church, the selling and the giving were voluntary.

The sin of Annanias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1) was not that they kept back part of the proceeds of the sale of their

property, but that they kept back part and pretended to bring the whole. Their sin was deceit and hypocrisy, not greed. Peter said to them, "Before you sold it, was it not your own?" (Acts 5:4), which is a very important part of apostolic preaching. In other words, your property is your own; you are a steward of it. It is for you to decide in a conscientious way before God what you will do with your property and possessions—how much you will keep and how much you will give away.

Although selling and giving are voluntary, we must not try to escape the challenge too easily. We who live in the affluence of America tend to skip over this passage too quickly. The church community is one community in the world in which poverty should be abolished. These early Christians really cared about the poor in their midst, sharing of their abundance, or affluence, according to need.

"I do believe that Jesus still calls some of his followers to total poverty," said Stott. Mother Teresa was an Albanian nun who planted her life among the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India, and was called the "Saint of the Gutters." Her sole possessions were three saris. She slept on a thin mattress, washed her own clothes, and sat on the floor. When a family offered her more furniture, she responded, "The fewer possessions I have, the better. I should have nothing to distract me from the poor."

In 1965, the Pope gave her the Lincoln Continental he used while he was visiting India. She raffled it off and used the money to help build a hospital for lepers.

When she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977, Mother Teresa asked the Nobel Prize committee to forego the traditional banquet for winners and use the money to give the poor a Christmas dinner instead.

Mother Teresa's life bears witness that a person's life does not consist of an abundance of the material possessions they have.

The average freshman at Miami University takes eigh-

teen appliances to campus, according to a survey taken by the school, and I suppose that's typical of most universities. They take a television, stereo, compact disc and DVD player, video game player, desktop computer, laptop, printer, scanner, refrigerator, microwave, and two fans. Then there are chargers for a cell-phone, hand-held computer, camera, electric razor and toothbrush. The rooms look like Circuit City (*Tyler Morning Telegraph*, Nov. 21, 2003).

Students come to campus in their cars and their dad's pickup truck while pulling a U-Haul trailer. Universities are forced to spend millions of dollars to rewire dormitories to handle the power surge.

We've just got lots of stuff! And all of this stuff has a tendency to distract us from our duty to share.

We need to carefully reexamine our own budgets. How much stuff are we buying and how much of our resources are we giving away? Not only do individuals need to study their budgets, so do churches. Most churches spend everything they get on themselves. They are not reaching out to the poor and needy of their communities. They are not sharing as Jesus did.

I heard Robert Davis, pastor of Pleasant Green Baptist Church in Longview, Texas, ask, "How much blessing can you stand before you turn your back on God?" Then he quoted Deuteronomy 6:10-12, "And it shall be, when the Lord thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not, and houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full; then beware, lest thou forget the Lord, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage."

I come back to where I started—where there is no gen-

erosity, there is no fellowship. With millions destitute, thousands starving to death daily, how can we close our hearts and minds to that? How can we spend so much on stuff rather than being good stewards?

The early Christians really cared about the poor in their midst, and we need to care, also.

Porcupines On a Cold Night

Third, we need to build a forbearing fellowship. Three times in scripture we are told to forebear one another in love: (Ephesians 4: 26-31; Colossians 3:13.) The word “forebear” means to “put up with,” “to endure a lot,” “to take a lot.”

There are bound to be conflicts in the church. There always were and there always will be. The only solution is that we put up with one another, take a lot off each other, and forgive one another.

We are like porcupines on a cold night—we need each other, even if we needle one another.

The poet put it best:

“To dwell up above with those that we love—that
will be glory.

To dwell here below with those that we know—
that’s a different story.”

Forbearance is one of the characteristics of God himself (Romans 2:4; 3:24). Think of how much God puts up with from us, how longsuffering he is with us, how much he endures from us. And if we are going to be like our Heavenly Father, then we, too, must be forbearing with one another.

Jewell Daniel, a missionary to China at the turn of the century, wrote about the difficulties of missionary service. She said, “It’s so hard to love each other out here!” Someone asked a retired missionary what the greatest problem was out on the mission field, and she said, “Truly! My

fellow workers! The devil knows that if he can sow seeds of discord among the missionaries, the field is his." I'm sure that the retired missionary knew the heartfelt answer to every missionary's heartiest problem. The heart of living together is one that must be judiciously cultivated here. "Once when I just couldn't understand my fellow worker, my Master said (to me in scripture), 'We beseech you, brethren, to know them that labor among you and esteem them exceedingly highly in love, for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves.' For their work's sake!"

It is important "for the work's sake" that the missionaries do everything possible to work together as a unit. Only headstrong, determined people have the grit to do mission work in a land where they are not wanted and where they are forced to work with personalities not of their choosing. For the sake of the work, they have to cooperate and follow the scriptural admonition to "count others as better than themselves" and to live in peace with the brethren and "sistern" (Britt Towery, *Carey Daniel's China Jewell*, 101-102).

It is the work that is most important. You don't always have to have your way. The church is not obligated to pander to your preferences. We must be willing to put aside our desires, wishes, and preferences for the sake of the work. The work is the important thing.

Jim Cymbola of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Church writes about the importance of church unity when he says, "One Sunday about 20 years ago, back in our days in the YMCA, I said something impromptu while receiving members into the church that has stuck with us ever since. People were standing in a row across the front before me. And as I spoke, the Holy Spirit seemed to prompt me to add, "And now, I charge you, as pastor of this church, that if you ever hear another member speak another unkind word of criticism or slander against anyone—myself, another pastor, an usher, a choir member, or anyone else—you have the au-

thority to stop that person in mid-sentence and say, 'Excuse me—who hurt you? Who ignored you? Who slighted you? Was it Pastor Cymbola? Let's go to his office right now. He'll get down on his knees, apologize to you, and then we'll pray together so God can restore peace to this body. But we will not let you talk critically about people who are not present to defend themselves. Please understand that I am entirely serious about this. I want you to help resolve this kind of thing immediately. And meanwhile, know this: if you are ever the one doing the loose talking, we will confront you'" (Jim Cymbola, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, 160).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said on one occasion, "Never take fellowship for granted. Someday you may be without it." The Lutheran pastor knew what he was talking about because he was in prison for his faith. The Lord convinced him that he should join the underground movement and oppose Adolf Hitler during World War II. He was arrested for joining in a plot to assassinate Hitler, imprisoned, and executed at the age of thirty-six.

Before the Holy Spirit came, there was no fellowship, only friendship. You can have friendship without the Spirit of God, but you cannot have fellowship. John writes, "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3).

To have fellowship, we must first come to faith and trust in God. We must have God as our Father, Jesus as our Savior, and the Holy Spirit to weld us together with other believers in a caring, sharing, and forbearing fellowship. I used to say to my folks in Tyler occasionally, "I can understand how some of you may not like me. I don't even like myself sometimes. But some of you are not so hot either." I was joking, but the fact is, the church has to put up with a lot from the preacher, and the preacher also

has to put up with a lot from the church. As I understand it, that's what forbearance is all about. Accepting one another, overlooking one another's faults, forgiving and continuing to love one another.

4

Worshipping:

Gaining Access to God
Acts 2:41-47; 12:5

A man visited a well-known Texas church—with a big band, loud music and a swaying choir. As he left, he said to the person who invited him, “This is a Whoopie Goldberg church.”

He was referring to the movie, *Sister Act*, starring Whoopie Goldberg. It was the story of a torch singer named Delores who performed at the Moonlight Lounge in Reno, Nevada. She witnessed a murder by the mob and was to be the star witness for the prosecution against them. They wanted her dead, so the police put her into the witness protection program and took her to a convent in San Francisco to conceal her identity until the trial. Her new name in the convent was Sister Mary Clarence.

Of course, she didn’t fit in with the life of the convent and was continually breaking the rules. Finally, Mother Superior lost patience and was about to throw her out. She pled for forgiveness and so was allowed to stay only if she would join the choir.

The church attached to the convent was dead with only a handful of attendees in a large, magnificent chapel. The priest began his services every Sunday with the words, “Welcome to the few and faithful.”

The choir was worse than bad. It was horrible. When they heard that Sister Mary had a musical background, they

made her the director. In two weeks, she had them swinging and swaying, jumping and jiving, as they sang hand-clapping, finger-snapping, toe-tapping, knee-slapping music. The music carried over into the streets, and people heard it and began coming to church. Soon, the church was filled with people from the streets and was alive and jiving.

There are lots of “Whoopie Goldberg” churches today that resemble a rock concert more than a religious service. I’m not here to critique “Whoopie Goldberg” churches because worship is always changing. At the turn of the century, choirs never did specials, and for a person to do a solo was considered a sin—it was a display, entertainment. But I do want to say that prayer has always been central in worship. And prayer requires a reasonable amount of quiet. It was Jesus who said, “My father’s house shall be called a house of prayer.” He said that in the context of so much noise in the temple that a person could not pray. Merchants had set up booths inside the temple to sell animals to be used for sacrifices and others had set up tables so worshippers could exchange their foreign coins for coins that could be used to pay the temple tax. There was so much bickering and haggling over prices that a person could hardly think, much less pray. That’s when Jesus turned over the moneychangers’ tables and drove those who sold animals out of the temple, saying, “My father’s house shall be called a house of prayer.”

When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and formed and filled the church, prayer became central. We get a glimpse of the Spirit-filled church in Acts 2:41-47. There are five marks of a Spirit-filled church given here: It is a believing church, a learning church, a fellowshiping church, a worshipping church and a witnessing church.

The first mark of a Spirit-filled church is believing. They believed in the Jesus of prophecy, the Jesus of history, and the Jesus of experience. They put the spotlight on him.

Second, it was a learning church. They devoted themselves to learning and living the words of the Apostles. We must get back to the Bible. We must preach it in the pulpit, teach it in the classroom, believe it in the pew, and live it in the streets.

The third mark is fellowship. We must have a caring, sharing and forbearing fellowship.

Fourth, we must have a worshipping church. We must continue in the breaking of bread and in prayers.

That church was a powerful church which changed individual lives and impacted its world. If we want what they had, we are going to have to do what they did. We're going to have to worship. Their worshipping included three elements: the teaching of the Apostles, remembering the Lord's death through the breaking of bread, and prayer. Prayer, in particular, was the central element of their church's worship.

Entertainment may get a crowd, but as Jim Cymbala reminds us, Jesus didn't die to fill a church auditorium. He died that people might know him personally and be transformed into his likeness. We must be beware of equating big crowds with the blessings of God. Jimmy Swaggert, Robert Tilton, and Jim Bakker were drawing great crowds when they were living outside the will of God. They gathered the crowds by their showmanship and promotion, not by the power of the Holy Spirit.

At the heart of a personal relationship with God is prayer. You cannot have a relationship with a person you don't talk to. We, therefore, must rediscover prayer. We must learn how to pray. The disciples asked Jesus on one occasion, "Lord, teach us to pray." They never said, "Lord, teach us to preach." They never said, "Lord, teach us to heal." They recognized that prayer was the secret to His great life and wanted to pray as He did.

Having been taught how to pray by the Lord, these disciples became men of prayer, and they taught the church

to pray. They prayed about everything. They prayed for wisdom, boldness, deliverance, forgiveness and peace.

They prayed everywhere. They prayed in the temple, in homes, on rooftops, in jail, by the riverside, and on ships.

They prayed in every posture. They prayed standing, walking, kneeling, lying down, and swimming in the ocean.

One example of the church praying is found in Acts 12:5, "Peter, therefore, was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him."

Persecution of the church had been intensified. Herod Agrippa I killed James. His father, Herod Antipus, had killed John the Baptist. His grandfather, Herod the Great, had killed the children that were slaughtered at the birth of Christ. Now he had followed their murderous ways. Then he put Peter in prison. Who could know what he'd do next?

So the church began to pray. Peter was bound in chains between two soldiers and a guard stood outside the prison door. In the middle of the night, an angel of the Lord woke him and instructed him to get up and leave the prison. The chains fell from his hands, and he walked out of the prison, past the guards, and through the iron gate, yet no one saw him.

Once free, he went to the home of Mary, the mother of John, where the disciples were gathered praying. He knocked on the gate, and a young maid named Rhoda heard his voice. She became so excited that she rushed into the room where the people were praying to tell them that Peter was there. They refused to believe her until Peter was brought into the house, and they heard his amazing story.

In this simple story and in that simple verse, "Prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him," is an example of the kind of praying we need to do:

- We ought to pray corporately.

- We ought to pray earnestly.
- We ought to pray specifically.

Great Things Happen When People Pray

First, we ought to pray corporately. The scriptures say that “the church” prayed without ceasing. The word “church” is used 22 times in the book of Acts. The Greek word translated “church” is *ekklesia*, which means “the assembly.”

The Greeks had a democratic form of government. The cities had regular town hall meetings. When a meeting was to be held, notice was sent to the citizens and those who heard and answered the call were called “the assembly.” At first, it had only a secular meaning, but gradually it was applied almost exclusively to a Christian meeting—those who had heard and answered the call of Christ.

So the assembly, the congregation, met to pray. There are some things we need to do together. One of them is worship. The scriptures say, “Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more as you see the day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25). I identify with the geese that fly in V- formation. Aerodynamic studies reveal that the flock adds seventy-one percent greater range than if each bird flew alone. A person may be a pagan alone, but one cannot be a Christian alone. Isolation is fatal.

We also need to pray together. To be sure, we ought to pray alone. Jesus said, “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” But he also taught us, “After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this

day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen." Note how often he uses the plurals "our, us, and we." Obviously he expected us to pray together. Great things happen when God's people pray together.

The whole Baptist missionary movement, the greatest missionary movement in history, began that way. In 1806, Samuel J. Mills and several fellow students at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, were caught in a rainstorm and took refuge in a haystack where they held an impromptu prayer meeting. Out of that prayer meeting came a dedicated group of young men, known as "the haystack group," who began to meet regularly to pray, ponder, and plan for some mission to the heathen. In that initial group was Luther Rice. Later, Adoniram Judson joined the group and out of that came the American Board of Commission for Foreign Missions, the first American society specifically designed for foreign missions. Eight from that group headed for India—four on one ship and four a few days later on another ship.

On one ship were Ann and Adoniram Judson, married on February 15, 1812, spending their honeymoon on the high seas.

The Judsons eventually went to Burma and endured many hardships for Christ. They lost a child to disease. Adoniram was imprisoned twenty-two months under the sentence of death when the Burmese government fought the British. Ann kept him alive for two years by selling her possessions and smuggling food to him. He would have died of malnutrition had she not taken care of him. When he was released from prison, Judson was forced to help the British with translation and treaty issues. Ann was again left alone for months. She started a new church and a school on her own initiative. She died in 1826 at the age

of thirty-seven.

But it all started because people prayed together. What great things could happen in our churches today if we re-discovered the power of prayer when God's people pray together.

Neither Goldberg nor Iceberg

Secondly, they prayed earnestly. The scriptures say, "Prayer was made without ceasing for him." The words "without ceasing" come from a Greek word that means "fervently," or "intensely." The church didn't just pray; it prayed with passion.

Passion is, I believe, the missing ingredient in most of our churches today. When we lose passion, we lose an essential element of vitality. The book of Malachi contains a string of indictments against the people of God for their shoddy worship and sinful lives. They went to worship and said to themselves, "Oh, what a weariness it is." They were not willing to abandon worship altogether, but neither were they willing to give their best to God, so they settled down to a dull, monotonous ritual.

William James reminds us that religion is either a dull habit or an acute fever. With the people of Malachi's time, it had become a dull habit. They had lost their passion.

We need passion in everything we do. We need to preach with passion. Richard Baxter said, "I preach as never to preach again. A dying man to dying men." When we stand in the pulpit, we need to remember people are lost, eternity is at stake, and people need to be saved. It's with that kind of intensity we should preach.

We need to sing with passion. Toscanini, the great conductor, used to say to his orchestra, "Play with your hearts, not with your instruments." And I say to the choir and to the congregation, "Sing with your hearts, not just with your lips. Put your heart and soul into it. Sing with some en-

thusiasm.”

Sometimes when I attend a church service, I really think I’ve come to a funeral by mistake. There is no energy. No passion. Nobody laughs; nobody smiles. The atmosphere is dismal. The hymns are played at a snail’s pace, like a funeral dirge.

We also need to pray with passion. Passion is Rufus Burleson, twice president of Baylor University, falling on his knees on the sands of Galveston and praying, “Oh, God, give me Texas for Jesus or I die.” It is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane praying, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done” (Matthew 26:36-44). The scripture describes it like this: “And being in agony, he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as if it were great drops of blood falling down on the ground.” That is passion.

We don’t need to have a “Whoopie Goldberg” church, but we don’t want an iceberg church either. We must put some fervency into all that we do. It’s easier to tame a fanatic than it is to resurrect the dead.

He Knows My Name

Thirdly, we need to pray specifically. The church prayed earnestly for him, i.e., for Peter. They didn’t pray for everyone in jail. They called him by name.

When you pray for me, call me by name, also. God will know whom you’re talking about. He knows my name. He’s already written my name in the Lamb’s Book of Life. And He knows your name, also. Everyone He called in the Bible He called by name. When God called Moses, He didn’t say, “Hey, you, over there by the bush. Come here.” He called him by name. He said, “Moses, Moses, take off your shoes, for you are standing on holy ground.” Moses realized at that moment that God knew his name.

Moses didn’t know God’s name. When God gave him

the assignment of going to Egypt and telling the Pharaoh to let his people go, Moses said, "Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel and shall say unto them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me unto you,' they shall say unto me, 'What is his name?' What shall I say unto them?" And God said unto Moses, "I AM THAT I AM," and He said, "Thus shall thou say unto the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me unto you'" (Exodus 3:13-14). Moses didn't know God's name, but God knew his. And He knows yours and mine also (Exodus 33:12, 17; Isaiah 45:4; John 10:3).

God marks the fall of every sparrow. He has numbered the hairs on your head. Columnist Paul Donohue said that the average person has 100,000 hairs on his/her head. Hair is always in one of three phases: the growth phase which lasts two to six years, the resting phase, then it eventually falls out. Fifty to one hundred hairs are shed every day. God has a lot to keep up with!

He has also numbered and named the stars of the heavens (Psalm 147:4). Do you know how many stars there are in the heavens? There are 200 billion billion (200,000,000,000,000,000,000). That's 200 with eighteen zeros after it. If everyone in the world were to begin counting stars, each person could count 50 billion of them and the same star would never be counted twice (*World Book Encyclopedia*, Vol. 18, 660).

I've heard advertisements on the radio and television that you can have a star named after you or after someone you love for a price. There are so many stars; in space, there is no chance that we'll ever put a name on every one of them, but God has already done it. If He knows the name of every star in the universe, if He's numbered the hairs on your head, if He marks the fall of every sparrow, surely He knows your name and mine. So, when you pray, pray specifically. Pray for people by name.

Most of all, when you pray, pray in Jesus' name. He is our mediator through whom we approach God (John 14:

13; 1 Timothy 2:5). Rev. James Meeks, pastor of the Armatage Baptist Church in Chicago, drew an analogy from personal computing that illustrates this when he said, "You can't enter any screen name and gain access to God. You can only gain access in the name of Jesus" (*Christianity Today*, February 2004, 29). Pray that way and your prayers will reach heaven.

5

Witnessing:

Three Ways to Witness
Acts 2:41-47

In the early sixties, A. C. Wimpee, one of our Texas Baptist leaders at the time, told me he boarded a plane headed for the Baptist World Alliance in South America. In conversation with the man he sat next to, he learned that the man was a member of an Assembly of God church. He asked the man where he was going, and he responded, "You'd be surprised. I'm going to the Baptist World Alliance, also." Then the man said, "You Baptists have the methods and organization necessary to get the job done, and we want to learn all we can from you, so that if you fail, we will be ready to take over."

That conversation took place forty years ago. Today the Assemblies of God are the fastest growing evangelical denomination in America, and we Baptists are barely holding our own.

If Baptists fail, it will not be due to a lack of sound doctrine, effective organization, or proven methods. It will be due to a lack of dedication and obedience. It will be because we have ceased to be witnesses for Christ.

Some form of the word witness is used over thirty times in the book of Acts. The word means "to testify," "to give testimony," "to give evidence." It comes from the root word "martyr" and suggests you are willing to risk your life, or stake your life on, what you are saying.

The Lord said that when the Holy Spirit comes, “He shall testify of me: and ye also shall bear witness because you have been with me from the beginning.” That promise was fulfilled at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit formed and filled the church. It became a spirit-filled church. We get a glimpse of that church in Acts 2:41-47. There are five marks of a spirit-filled church: It is a believing church, a learning church, a fellowshiping church, a worshipping church, and a witnessing church.

That New Testament church was powerful, changed the lives of individuals and had a tremendous impact on society. If we want what they had, we must do what they did. We must become witnesses for Christ. That was the first command of the risen Lord. He told the disciples, “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost has come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Then he said, “Don’t stand around waiting; don’t sit around wondering; don’t look around watching. You’ve got your orders; go.”

Salvation comes through Christ alone, but we must make him known. His plan includes us. We are all to be witnesses for Christ.

When these disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, they had a desire to tell others about him. That’s the natural result of being filled with the Holy Spirit. If we do not have a desire to tell others, it is evident we do not know the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

The witnessing was done by everyone, to everyone, at every opportunity. They witnessed to everyone. There were people in Jerusalem for the Passover from every nation under the heavens. Sixteen nations are named. They witnessed to them, to the Sanhedrin, to high government officials like the eunuch, to Roman soldiers like Cornelius, to kings like Agrippa and governors like Felix, to philoso-

phers like the Athenians, to officers of the law like the Philippian jailer, to mobs like the one in Jerusalem, and to everyone else they encountered. We ought to do the same thing. We ought to witness to waiters and waitresses, to clerks, to mechanics, to neighbors, to family, and to fellow employees.

Everyone witnessed. When persecution came and believers fled back to their own countries, the scriptures say, "They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). And this was not a reference to the apostles because they remained in Jerusalem. And they witnessed everywhere—in the temple, on the streets, in halls of justice, in synagogues, and in jails.

John R. Stott reminds us of several facts that need to be noted about evangelism. First it was the Lord himself who added people to the church. Nobody can do that but Jesus. He is the head of the church; He is the Lord of the church. He reserves for himself the prerogative of adding people to the church.

Second, He adds to the church those whom He is saving. He does not save them without adding them to the church, and He does not add them to the church without saving them. Salvation and church membership go together. They did in those days, and they still do today.

Third, Jesus did it every day. The evangelization of the Jerusalem church was not an occasional or sporadic thing. They evangelized continually. The Lord was adding to their number through the preaching of the apostles, through the witnessing of Christians, and through the love of their common life (fellowship).

How did they witness then? How do we witness today? Let me suggest three ways:

- By being a loving, joyous church.
- By living a good life.
- By being a bold witness.

A Loving and Joyous Fellowship

First, we witness by being the church. The church itself is a witness to the world. Not the building, though its spire pointing up to heaven does give some witness to Him, for early Christians had no buildings until 250 A.D. It is by a joyous, loving fellowship that the church bears witness to Christ.

By the way we act, the way we treat one another, and the kind of fellowship we have, we send a clear message about Him. The scriptures say concerning that first church that they had “favor with all the people.” The root word for “favor” means “to cheer, to applaud, to approve, to please.” It is the same word that was used by the angel when he announced to Mary that she would give birth to the Messiah. He said, “Mary, you have found favor with God.” It is the same word used to describe the formative years of Jesus’ life when it says, “He increased in wisdom, stature, and favor with God and man.”

In the same way that Mary found favor with God, in the same way that Jesus found favor in the sight of God and humanity, so the New Testament church found favor, or approval, with the people. It was a winsome church. The people liked it. They applauded it.

In the spring of 1997, I received an unusual phone call from Bob Cullen, who for twenty-nine years served as one of our Southern Baptist missionaries to Thailand. He was preparing to return to the mission field and wanted to tell a story that would interest me. My first book, published in 1977 and entitled *How to Make Your Church Hum*, was a small book on church growth.

Bob translated it into the Thai language to help the churches there. He changed the title to *How to Bring Life to Your Church* to better fit their culture. Several months after the book was released, he said he received a phone call from a young man who wanted to know how to become a

Christian. He asked the young man why he had called. He had read the book about an “alive church” and wanted to be part of an organization like that. So when a church is what it ought to be, alive, dynamic, and joyous, it attracts people to Christ.

There are two things about this spirit-filled church that impressed the world—its harmony and its happiness. The scriptures say they “were together,” “they were in one accord,” and “they had a singleness of heart.” It was a united, harmonious church. A lady said to a preacher friend, “You Baptists think you go all the way back to John the Baptist.” He responded, “No, m’aam, we go back further than that. We go all the way back to Abraham. You remember that Abraham said to his nephew, Lot, ‘You go your way and I’ll go mine’.”

We are bound to have disagreements. The New Testament church did. The first disagreement was when a group of widows felt they were being neglected by the church and began to murmur and complain. That happens. The second disagreement came over doctrine. Some felt a person must first be circumcised before becoming a Christian. They would have made Christianity a sect of Judaism. Others said faith in Christ alone was enough. So a council was convened in Jerusalem to address the issue. Peter told how God had saved Cornelius, the Roman centurion. Paul and Barnabas told how God how saved Gentiles on their first missionary journey, and James quoted Amos 9:11-12 that predicted the salvation of the Gentiles. The whole church then gave its approval and blessings.

One of the most severe disagreements was between Paul and Barnabas. Paul owed a great deal to Barnabas. When he came back to Jerusalem after his conversion and his preaching in Damascus, the disciples were leery of him. They feared he might have faked conversion to infiltrate their group. It was Barnabas who put his arms around Paul and vouched for him before the others. When a re-

vival broke out in the church in Antioch and Barnabas was sent to minister there, he enlisted Paul to help him in his work, and when the church in Antioch sent out its first missionaries, it was Barnabas and Paul who went. Initially, the team is spoken of as Barnabas and Saul, but in time, Paul becomes the leader and Barnabas willingly takes a back seat to Paul's leadership.

When they prepared to go on their second missionary journey, conflict arose. John Mark had accompanied them on their first missionary journey, but when they got to Perga, he returned home early. We are not sure why, but whatever the reason, it was unacceptable to Paul. John Mark was Barnabas' nephew, and he wanted to take John Mark with them on this second journey, but the apostle Paul refused. The scriptures say that the contention between them was "sharp" and that they "departed asunder" (Acts 15:39). The word "departed" literally means "to rend a garment, to split, to tear." The tension was so sharp that they could no longer work together, so there was conflict in the church. Fortunately, they dealt with it in such a way that the work of God was not hindered.

The problem with division in the church is that it does not tell the truth about Jesus. Jesus came to reconcile the world to God. Then He gave to us the ministry of reconciliation. When we cannot get along with one another, we present a false message to the world concerning Jesus Christ.

In disputes, we need to have enough courage to speak up and enough humility to shut up. As Mother Teresa said on one occasion, "If you do good, do it without a fuss."

We can put people on the moon; we can send machines to Mars and receive photographs back; but we still have a hard time living together here on earth because putting a man on the moon is much easier than living in harmony.

Another thing that caused the church to have favor with the world was its happiness. "They ate their bread with

gladness." The word "gladness" means "exultation." Those early believers had a high degree of joy. Why shouldn't they? God had come down to earth in human flesh. Christ had given his life on the cross so that our sins might be forgiven. The Holy Spirit had come to dwell within them. They had every reason to rejoice.

Joy is one of the dominant characteristics of the Christian life. So the church ought to be a place of happiness. Yet the services of many churches I visit are so dull and depressed that I often feel as Vance Havner said, "Surely Jesus didn't die for this." There is enough unhappiness in the world without the church adding to it. Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit. When He fills the church, it will be a happy place and people will want to go there. It will find favor with people. If you want to be a good witness for Christ, then you must create a harmonious fellowship, and the church must be a happy, joyous place where we blend reverence and rejoicing together.

Almost Betrayed

Second, we witness by living the good life. Our lives become a platform from which we can bear witness to Jesus Christ. I heard about a basketball player at a Catholic school who was a terrible free throw shooter. He threw up brick after brick. Before he shot his free throws, he always made the sign of the cross. One day the coach said to him, "Bill, the Monsignor has asked that you stop making the sign of the cross before you shoot your free throws. You are making the church look bad."

We ought never to do anything that makes the church, or Jesus Christ himself, look bad.

We ought to live lives of integrity. A man said to his boss, "I need to get off work tomorrow and the next day, because my grandmother died." Of course, the boss let him off. When he came back to work two days later, the

secretary said to him, "Do you believe in people returning from the dead?" He replied, "No, why do you ask?" She said, "Your grandmother dropped in to visit you yesterday."

A friend told me that several years ago when the Southern Baptist Convention met in Oklahoma City, a well-known preacher spoke at one of the churches on Sunday night. The next morning he boarded a bus to the convention center and handed the driver a dollar bill for his fare. The driver gave him his change, and he dropped a quarter in the meter for his fare and walked back to his seat. When he counted his change, he realized that the driver had given him too much in return. His first thought was to forget about it—it wasn't much. On second thought, he went back to the driver and said to him, "Sir, I believe you made a mistake. You gave me too much change."

The driver said, "I know. I heard you preach last night, and I just wanted to see if you practiced what you preached." The preacher went back to his seat, sat down, and thought, "I have often criticized Judas for betraying Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, and I almost betrayed Him for less than that."

Using Words

Third, we witness by sharing our testimony. St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel at all times; use words if necessary." There are times when words are necessary. We are to live the Christian life, but we cannot, by living the good life, tell people about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

We are to live our faith, but we are not the gospel. We are a product of the gospel. The gospel is that Christ died, was buried, and raised again. You can't live in such a way in which you proclaim without words. It is too much for you and too little for the gospel.

Peter wrote, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ" (1 Peter 3:15-16).

We are to know well the truths of the faith and be prepared to present them at any time. The church was. When they were hailed before the Jewish Sanhedrin, they were ready. When the Lord sent Philip to Samaria to meet the Ethiopian eunuch, he was ready. When the Lord sent Simon Peter to the house of Cornelius, he was ready. When the apostle Paul was jailed in Philippi and the jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul was ready. When Paul encountered the philosophers at Mars Hill, he was ready. When Felix, the Roman governor, questioned him, he was ready. When Herod Agrippa, the king, interrogated him, he was ready. When the Jewish mob attacked him, he was ready.

How did they get ready? They knew Christ, and they knew the scriptures. I am amazed when I read through the book of Acts at how many times the Old Testament is quoted. They had learned the scriptures and when the need arose, the Holy Spirit brought those scriptures to mind.

What makes that remarkable is that they had no Bibles like we have. The only scriptures in those days were written on scrolls copied by hand. They were cumbersome in size and terribly expensive. Loose-leaf books did not come into existence until 300 AD. The Bible was not divided into chapters until 1250 AD. The printing press that made multiplying books easier did not come into existence until approximately 1450 AD. The Bible was not divided into verses until 1551 AD. Yet, these people knew the scriptures. How did they know them? They had committed them to memory.

In addition to having knowledge, we must have boldness. The scriptures say, "When they saw the boldness of Peter and John, they took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus." The word "boldness" does not mean brashness, rudeness, or insensitivity. It literally means "unashamed liberty." Timidity, or cowardice, is going to kill us. We must stop being ashamed of Jesus and willing to share the good news with other people. That requires courage.

Our faith has not come to us through faintheartedness. In 1660, John Bunyan left home to conduct a worship service at a friend's house. Earlier in the year, England's King Charles II had made all non-Anglican houses of worship illegal, rendering Bunyan's preaching of the gospel an act of treason. Arriving at the farm house, Bunyan learned of a warrant issued for his arrest. His friends urged him to flee. He replied, "I will not stir, neither have the meeting dismissed. Let us not be daunted. To preach God's word is so good a work that we shall be well rewarded if we suffer for that." For that he spent twelve years in Bedford prison.

Our founders not only knew the scriptures, but they were people of courage willing to suffer if necessary so the truth might spread.

The word "witness" comes from a root word meaning "martyr." It suggests that a person believes something so strongly that one is willing to give his/her life for it. Paul and Barnabas were once described as "those who have hazarded their lives for the gospel." The word "hazarded" is a gambling term. They risked their lives. They bet their lives on the truth of the gospel. That's the courage and conviction they had.

If we want to be a Spirit-filled church, we must give ourselves to witnessing.

The New Testament church was neither sterile nor arthritic. They saw themselves as pilgrims on the move for

God. They launched out; they risked their lives; and they pushed on to new frontiers to get the gospel to the ends of the earth.

But how easily pilgrims become tenants, and how quickly tenants aspire to ownership. "Let us stop here," soon becomes, "Let us build here," 'til finally it becomes, "Let us die here." From tents to temples to tombs, the allurement to stop and do nothing never goes away.

May the Lord give us a vision, a restlessness, and a boldness to never stop witnessing until all people everywhere know Christ.