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Andrew M. Davis Sermon

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Rely on God's Word, Not Techniques

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Every week at First Baptist Church in Durham, I am privileged to handle a miracle, to immerse myself in the midst of a miracle... I do not claim to be a "faith healer" And we don't do snake handling. Yet I believe that the written Word of God, the Bible, is a miracle... by any reasonable definition you might give of it.

C.S. Lewis, in his little book simply entitled *Miracles*, defined a miracle as the interference with the Laws of Nature by supernatural power. He acknowledged that this was a popular or common definition, rather than a polished theological one, and I admit it has some problems.

I would add that the effect of a miracle is to produce faith in those who observe it...

As the Apostle John put it at the end of his amazing gospel:

John 20:30-31 Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

So, a miracle is an interference with the Laws of Nature by a supernatural power.

So how is the BIBLE a miracle? And how is faithful expositional preaching of texts of scripture a weekly encounter with a

miracle? Well, simply put, the Bible is a record of prophecies, clear predictions of future events that have come true... and in that alone, it meets Lewis's definition. Christianity ALONE possesses this feature... a Book that breaks the laws of nature by predicting the future. There are no Hindu prophecies, or Buddhist, or Islamic, or truly now Jewish prophecies – among those who call themselves Jews but who reject that Jesus Christ is their Messiah and their God. Cults have tried to make predictions – like the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons... but they have failed again and again.

But the Bible at least in this one matter of telling the end from the beginning is utterly unique... and God alone claims to be able to do it:

Isaiah 41:22-23 "Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen. ... Declare to us the things to come, ²³ tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods. Do something, whether good or bad, so that we will be dismayed and filled with fear.

Isaiah 44:7-8 Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come-- yes, let him foretell what will come. ⁸ Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one."

The Bible's ability to predict the future, of course, centered on the person of Jesus Christ... and in one of the most dramatic moments in redemptive history, Jesus stood up in the synagogue of Nazareth, in his hometown, and rolled open the scroll of Isaiah the prophet and read words that were over seven hundred years old:

Luke 4:18-19 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he stunned the watching assembly of his neighbors with these words: **“Today, in your hearing, this scripture is FULFILLED.”**

This is quite simply a miracle... that a prophet who lived seven centuries before Christ could write detailed predictions of Jesus’ life, ministry, death, burial, resurrection, and worldwide reign through the spreading of the message of faith... this is a MIRACLE

But here I want to speak of another miracle... the power of the Word of God to release sinners from the invisible bonds of sin, from the spiritual chains that have bound them, from the spiritual blindness that has prevented them from seeing the glory of God in the face of Christ before that moment... the NEW BIRTH is a miracle that is the centerpiece of the advance of the Kingdom of God... and the supernatural growth of a formerly dead sinner to be a glorious imitator of Christ is also a miracle

It is the center of everything we are doing in the work of the ministry... it is the central purpose of the church... and only the WORD OF GOD can work this miracle

My desire today is to urge you to embrace the miracle of God’s Word, the Bible, and put your whole trust in it to transform your church, and the individuals in it. Like Lewis, I want you to trust in this miracle rather than in the SCIENCE of techniques of church revitalization... the SCIENCE of methodology and pragmatism, that teaches that if you learn the right methods and apply them in the right way, 100% of the time you will get a revitalized church.

I. Church Health Comes by Hearing

A. Revitalization of Whole Churches Comes by the Faith of Its Members

1. Whole churches are transformed by individuals being genuinely converted and then empowered by the Spirit to bear fruit for the glory of God

Romans 1:16-17 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹⁷ For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

Romans 10:13 "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Romans 10:14-15 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵ And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Romans 10:17 Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

2. This is the theology of the gospel... and the faith which makes sinners right before God
3. As Paul made plain earlier:

Romans 3:23-25 all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a propitiation through faith in his blood.

4. Local churches need to be revitalized whenever its leaders and members have in some significant ways turned away from God through sin resulting in spiritual deadness

There is no other method given to churches by which we must be revitalized than the Word of God in its testimony to the saving work of Christ.

B. The Central Miracle of Regeneration:

2 Corinthians 4:6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

1. This is the miracle of the new birth
2. And where God says “Let there be light” he also must say “Let there be sight”
3. The eyesight of the soul is FAITH... which comes by hearing the word of God
4. The genuine transformation of sinners by this means is the central BUILDING BLOCK of any genuine revitalization effort

C. Progressive Growth into Maturity is Like It

1. After the New Birth comes sanctification... genuine growth from spiritual immaturity to maturity
2. This is what changes a church deeply, richly, fully from death to life
3. And this growth happens the same way justification first came... by faith in God’s Word
4. As the pastor clearly UNFOLDS the word of God in sermon after sermon, he is an instrument of the Holy Spirit for the conversion of spiritually dead people to new life... and then previously immature people to become more and more gloriously conformed to Christ
5. This and this alone is the work of revitalization... all other works that do not make this the centerpiece are frauds

D. The Entire Teaching Ministry of the Church Must Reflect This

1. From the pulpit to every Sunday school class to one on one discipleship to small group ministries to the Youth Group to the senior adult ministries and everything else in the church... this must be the drive... that the WORD OF GOD and its power to transform the human soul be the central theme
2. And the cross of Christ must be the center of the center

1 Corinthians 2:2 I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

E. This Was the Work at FBC

1. I trusted in the sufficiency of scripture... = the Bible and the Spirit are enough

2 Peter 1:3-4 His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴ Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

2. Sufficiency of scripture = I put all my eggs in this one basket

Psalm 1:1-3 Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. ² But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. ³ He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

3. FBC had had many godly pastors and lay leaders before me
4. BUT there was still a faction of people who showed open disrespect for the Word of God

Woman on search committee... I was answering many questions; I kept pulling out my pocket Bible and quoting this or that passage

She laughed and said, "You really think all the answers are in that book, don't you!"

I said "Yes ... for the running of a healthy local church, and the salvation of souls for the glory of God, I do!"

I should have been warned right there and then!

The battle we had on Gender and Authority really started with the doctrine of the inspiration and authority of the Word of God:

2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

God mysteriously breathed out his words into the minds and personalities of the prophets and apostles by the Holy Spirit, and the SUFFICIENCY of the perfect word of God for the SALVATION of sinners and their being thoroughly equipped for good works is clear

Psalm 12:6 And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times.

5. Many at FBC fought this word

Account of Uzzah and the Ark... "I could never believe in a God like that!"

"I don't care what Paul says... I KNOW what I believe!"

"Lord help us to know we are a modern people and don't need to follow the Bible anymore."

II. Sola Scriptura and Luther Trust in God's Word

A. The Protestant Reformation... the most sweeping revival in the history of the church

1. Luther nailed the Ninety-five Theses on the Door of the Wittenberg Castle beginning a debate on indulgences
2. It was the culmination of a deep inner struggle that one monk had had to find salvation from hell... the medieval Roman Catholic church could not offer him any assurance
3. But it was the ministry of the Scripture that saved him... especially the famous Romans 1:17

Romans 1:16-17 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

4. When Luther understood this phrase “righteousness of God” as being part of the GOOD NEWS of verse 16, and that it freed sinners from the wrath of God revealed in verse 18, he felt that the doorway of heaven was opened at last

“Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the “justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.”

5. He then turned to analyze everything in the Roman Catholic church by means of his discovery of the true gospel... even more deeply, he saw that the right understanding and application of the Word of God was key to a true church of Jesus Christ
6. All Luther wanted to do was unleash the Word of God on a people who had never really heard it
 - a. The common people had no Bible in their language
 - b. When they came to church on Sunday, they heard a bunch of Latin HOCUS-POCUS... there was no clear explanation of the Word of God
 - c. So all of Luther’s labors centered on this... he translated the whole Bible into good, clear, robust German and had them published by the tens of thousands
 - d. And week after week, he stood in a pulpit and walked through the Scripture with clear explanations and moving applications
7. On trial for his life at the Diet of Worms, Luther said these famous words:

“Unless I am convinced by scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word

of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen”

8. Luther lived the rest of his life to unleash the Word of God for the salvation of souls

9. In a sermon in 1522, he explained the Reformation in these words:

“I simply taught, preached, wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip and my Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing. The Word did it all!”

10. In the end, if your church or my church or any church will be truly revitalized, it will be by the central work of the Spirit in the unleashing of the Word of God

III. Trusting the Word *Alone* vs. the “Science” of Revitalization

A. Fighting Against the Spirit of Charles Finney

1. He invented a terminology of the science of revival, called the “New Measures”
2. Many of our time-honored revivalistic patterns come from him, like walking the aisle at an invitation
3. He was a thorough-going Pelagian... denying original sin; saying everyone could make the same moral choice as Adam... Adam gave us nothing more than a BAD EXAMPLE and Christ gives us nothing more than a GOOD EXAMPLE
4. Specifically on the topic of revival, he said

A revival of religion is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means – as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means

One of Finney’s critics at the time, Princeton Professor Albert Dod, declared that through Finney’s “experiments with the efficacy

of different measures, the house of God becomes transformed into a kind of laboratory.” The SCIENCE of revival

B. Revitalization IS a Miracle... the Direct Intervention of the Sovereign Power of God

1. Trying not to reduce our approach to something that can be bottled and sold

The idea that revival, or for our purposes, revitalization, can be reduced to a series of inevitably successful principles or techniques is still alive today. All you have to do is Google something like “Ten easy steps to church renewal” and you will get an amazing potpourri of practical advice. That is the danger of my book on revitalization ... as well. Every church revitalization situation is unique, with its own set of challenges. Yet in every case, true revitalization comes not with man-developed techniques, but with a firm reliance on the sufficiency of the Word of God to transform human hearts.

In the 21st century, man-centered revitalization techniques focus on other ways to tickle the sensibilities of seekers, attenders, and church members. It is not much different than the era of the medieval Roman Catholic church, or the 19th century locales where Finney and the other preachers of the Second Great Awakening did their labors. The appeal to the five senses in the Middle Ages resulted in amazing Cathedrals with soaring architecture, stunning stained-glass windows, magnificent sculptures, the majestic tones of pipe organs, and the “smells and bells” of the Latin mass. The appeal to the senses in Finney’s era centered on a style of preaching that employed high volume and energy in theatrical presentations of biblical themes, the psychological pressure made by the “anxious bench” (later developed into the techniques of the “invitation” and the “altar call”), and the use of culturally pleasing frontier music.

Our techniques might include a sleek-looking building designed like a country club for comfort, state of the art electronics including projection of appealing images, cutting-edge worship music

that stays current with popular tastes, the use of hand-held smartphones and Twitter accounts to enable an interactive connection with the preacher and the audience by which hearers can tweet questions in the middle of the service that get answered right away, and “relevant” sermons that immediately address felt needs of the hearers and stay away from deep theology. The employment of such men-centered techniques will never produce genuine transformation of the human heart, and therefore, will never produce genuine revitalization.

IV. The Pulpit: The Word of God Unleashed a Line at a Time

A. My Mentor: John MacArthur

1. Soon after I came to faith in Christ, I began listening to “Grace to You”
2. MacArthur’s slogan: “Unleashing God’s Word, once verse at a time”
3. His consistent and patient and careful verse-by-verse expositions have become my basic model for the pulpit ministry
4. Though I do not believe that this is the only way to preach powerfully (Charles Spurgeon didn’t do it)... yet I think expositional preaching is the most impactful thing a revitalizing pastor can do week after week
5. This will gain the TRUST of the people... as he goes through both MILK and MEAT passages, they will over time be able to trust him as a faithful handler of the Word of God
6. And even if they aren’t ready to agree with him on everything, his position as their spiritual leader will be more and more secure

B. John Calvin... Another Role Model

Calvin was preaching systematically, verse by verse through the Book of Psalms

The civic leaders who were also the church leaders evicted Calvin from his ministry and he went into exile from Geneva to Strasbourg in 1538

After three years, the city was tending toward moral anarchy and chaos and desperately wanted Calvin to come back and continue his ministry in Geneva

He reluctantly agreed to do so, and his first Sunday back in the pulpit, September of 1541, he resumed right where he'd left off preaching Psalms three years before!

C. Paul: The Best Role Model

Acts 20:20 You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.

Acts 20:26-27 I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

1. Another translation: Paul did not SHRINK BACK from proclaiming the WHOLE COUNSEL of God
2. We are all tempted to be cowards and to hold back from some doctrines that we know will not be popular
3. But this approach to the pulpit protects us from our own cowardice
4. The "Whole Counsel of God" = milk and meat

D. Truth Through Personality

Phillips Brooks' was considered one of the great "princes of the pulpit" in the nineteenth century. Perhaps his most lasting legacy were his Yale lectures on preaching in which he defined preaching as the "*communication of truth through personality.*"

I think Pastoral Ministry should add a feature to preaching for the same flock that you have come to know and love

Preaching is truth through RELATIONSHIP

Think of how Paul began his charge to the Ephesian elders:

Acts 20:18-21 *When they arrived, he said to them: "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. ¹⁹ I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. ²⁰ You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. ²¹ I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.*

And think of these words:

Acts 20:25-27 *"Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. ²⁶ Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.*

And these words:

Acts 20:31-35 *Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. ³² "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³ I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵ In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*

And finally this:

Acts 20:36 *When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed.*

It is CLEAR that his preaching ministry among them was one of a deep relationship of LOVE

And see their reaction:

*Acts 20:37-38 They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. ³⁸
 What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see
 his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.*

V. Practical Steps

- 1) Look to your own heart and life first. Are you having a daily quiet time in the Word? Are you feeding your soul daily on the Word of God? "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).
- 2) Memorize scripture, even whole books of the Bible. This will be a powerful tool in transforming your own heart, but also equipping you to minister to others. And, if you are a regular preaching pastor in a local church, the time you invest in memorization will pay back dividends that you can scarcely imagine in all aspects of your ministry, but especially your preaching ministry.
- 3) Trust in the Word of God to revitalize your church. Put all your eggs in this one basket. Look again at the promise in Psalm 1:1-3, that you will prosper in whatever you do. This especially applies to the blessing of God's people in a local church.
- 4) Reject human techniques and transferable concepts that are "guaranteed" to work in every church. Trust in the Word to do the work.
- 5) If you are a regular preacher of the Word, embrace expositional preaching as the centerpiece of your ministry. Seek to feed Christ's sheep faithfully with nothing but the Word of God. Understand that the work of revitalization is a subset of the gospel ministry of reconciliation of sinners to God through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Make certain that the main point of your sermon is always the main point of the text. Stand humbly under the Word of God and faithfully deliver what it says to the people. Avoid "hobby horses" and selected texts that you are tempted to "hurl" at particularly irksome opponents. That is a misuse of the pulpit.

- 6) If you are a preacher, consider sequential exposition of books of the Bible. Consider how you may best “unleash God’s Word one verse at a time.” Choose books that will maximally feed the sheep early on in your revitalization effort without causing them to stumble over doctrines for which they are not yet ready. Perhaps start with a simple gospel epistle like 2 Timothy or Philippians. Then move gradually to weightier books like Romans, Ephesians, or Galatians. Build trust patiently.
- 7) If you are a layleader, not a preacher, pray for these things for your pastor.
- 8) Be very confident in the power of the Word of God. Never be ashamed of anything the Word teaches. Know that unregenerate church members will stumble badly over the more controversial aspects of the Word and will blame you as though you wrote them. Deal with such ignorance patiently and faithfully, pointing these things out from the text.
- 9) Teach the congregation the value of the ministry of the Word of God. If you are a pastor, make your study time in the Word a top priority. Give yourself faithfully to developing as a preacher. Paul said this to Timothy: “Be diligent in these matters [i.e. preaching, teaching]; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:15-16). Understand that the ongoing work of salvation (both in your soul and in the soul of your hearers) depends on your faithful ministry of the Word.
- 10) In church revitalization situations, the immaturity concerning the Word of God can be appalling. Perhaps the church has not had faithful preaching or teaching in years. Be patient and persevere.
- 11) Read books on church growth, health, revitalization, and revival. Do so knowing that there is no transferable “formula” for

success that will work every time. Be skeptical of techniques that do not make central the sovereign power of God.