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Sermon Notes

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Rely on God's Word, Not Techniques

Every week at FBC, I am privileged to handle a miracle, to immerse myself in the midst of a miracle... I am not a charismatic, nor do I claim to be a "faith healer" like some of the more infamous TV preachers of the last fifty years. Yet I believe that the written Word of God, the Scripture, the Bible is a miracle... by any reasonable definition you might give of it.

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... 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 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 spiritual 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 get 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. 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 am going to say that this mindset has come down to us from the past, was articulated by Charles Finney and by others in our evangelical heritage, and is a constant temptation to us now

I. Revitalization Comes by Hearing

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

Romans 1:16 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.

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

1. This is the theology of the gospel... and the faith which makes sinners right before God
2. Local churches need to be revitalized because 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.

C. Progressive Growth into Maturity is Like It

Galatians 3:3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

1. 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
2. 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

E. This Was the Work at FBC

1. I trusted in the sufficiency of scripture
2. Sufficiency = 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

3. 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.

2 Timothy 3:15-17 the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 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

4. 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

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

II. Sola Scriptura and Luther's "Laziness"

1. 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
2. And 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

3. 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

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.

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

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.
- 6) 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.