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## 06 "Never hang alone"

Dan Towar

It is not good for the pastor to pastor alone—utilize your team of leaders.

## 09 The leadership style of Ezra

D. J. Speckner

Change your leadership style and be as effective as Ezra.

## 11 Shepherding is a team effort

Neil Silverberg

It really does take a village—learn how elders and pastors can work in partnership.

## 14 Paul at Athens: A study in tactical leadership

Jeff Scoggins

Follow Paul as he models how to lead diverse congregations.

## 18 Spiritual leadership: What is "spiritual" about being spiritual?

Hymers Wilson

It's time to view spirituality as sensible, not sentimental.

## 21 Redistributed life: When a church closes its doors

Len Hjalmarsen

Dedicated prayer and careful planning need to be involved when deciding whether or not to close a church's doors.

## 05 Editorial

## 25 Resources

## 26 Dateline

## 30 Practical Pointers

### MINISTRY®

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Jeffrey O. Brown, PhD, is associate editor of *Ministry*.



# It's possible

There is a chapter in the Bible that lists the all-stars of biblical history: Hebrews 11. It says these all died in faith and are looking forward to a heavenly city, whose Builder and Maker is God. All the big names are there. Then it mentions people whose names are not listed, but they did awesome acts. It says about them, "Of whom the world was not worthy..." (v. 38).

I asked myself, who are these nameless, courageous, faithful people? I think I know. They are people who do not live in the limelight. They may not hold high positions in society or church. They may not have received public awards and accolades, but their influence is often manifested by one outstanding characteristic.

Robin Sharma informs us that leadership is less about a title and more about influence, inspiration, and impact.<sup>1</sup> I would say, then, that my sister Anne was a leader, albeit a quiet one. Paul said, "This one thing I do" (Phil. 3:13, KJV). Anne's one thing was the influence of her capacity to care.

A religion graduate from Newbold College of Higher Education and missionary to Masanga Leprosy Hospital, Sierra Leone, West Africa, Anne sent cards to anyone, for every occasion: birthday, Christmas, Easter. When others forgot, you knew a card was coming from Anne. And not any card—just the right card, selected with uncanny appropriateness and meticulous love. Even my mother-in-law in Bermuda

would receive a greeting card from Anne, in England. Who sends cards to their brother's mother-in-law?

Anne cared for everybody. She wrote letters that demonstrated her love and passion, and she sent them far and wide. I received a letter from Buckingham Palace that said, "The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge were most touched by the thoughtful gift you so kindly sent on the occasion of the birth of their son, Prince George." A gift? From me? I discovered that Anne had sent them a copy of our parenting book.<sup>2</sup> Even royalty was not outside the reach of Anne's care.

Anne died tragically three years ago. Her last card to us, an Easter card, carried the text, "Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25, KJV). It arrived three days after her passing.

It's not about idolizing persons at their funeral. Edward Kennedy said of Robert F. Kennedy, "My brother need not be idealized, or enlarged in death beyond what he was in life; to be remembered simply as a good and decent man, who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it."<sup>3</sup> That's the one thing of a political leader. What about some Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders who have recently died?<sup>4</sup> Don Schneider's one thing was his contagious love for Jesus. Harold Baptiste's one thing was his unwavering integrity.<sup>5</sup> Samuel

DeShay's one thing was his infectious love of life.

At Dr. DeShay's funeral, a story was told of his service in the mission field. They brought him a patient with an arresting odor. Dr. DeShay asked, "Did you wash him?" "Yes," they said. "We washed from the head down, as far as possible." The smell was strong, so Dr. DeShay asked another party, "Did you wash him?" "Yes," they said. "We washed from the feet up, as far as possible." Dr. DeShay then handed the patient back and said, "Now go and wash possible."

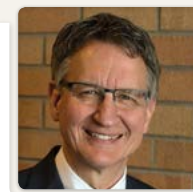
Dr. DeShay's obituary stated, "He leaves to await the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, his devoted wife, Bernice . . . and in a very special way, the entire continent of Africa." Is it possible now to influence what people will say about you then? I think it's possible. Is it possible for one person to influence a church, a community, a country, even a continent? Jesus said, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26, NASB). ❖

- 1 See Robin S. Sharma, *The Leader Who Had No Title* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2010).
- 2 Jeffrey and Pattiejean Brown, *A Guide to Parenting: On the Winning Team With Your Children* (Grantham, UK: Autumn House, 2003).
- 3 Edward M. Kennedy, "Address at the Public Memorial Service for Robert F. Kennedy," June 8, 1968, St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York, NY. <https://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ekennedytributetorfk.html>.
- 4 See Dateline section, page 27.
- 5 See Walter Earl Fluker, ed., *The Stones That the Builders Rejected: The Development of Ethical Leadership from the Black Church Tradition* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998).





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# “Never hang alone”

When I first came to our new church, a seasoned pastor and district superintendent gave me a welcoming phone call. He knew that I was going to a larger church and thus offered me this advice: “Never hang alone.”

“What do you mean by ‘never hang alone?’” I asked.

He explained that pastors need to involve elders in decision-making. If elders are involved, the pastor does not have to do it alone. He or she has their support.

But if you as the pastor have not involved the church leadership team, all the responsibility falls on you, and you will, he warned, find yourself “hanging alone.” If opposition arises against a decision that you and your elders and church board have collaborated on, then all share the responsibility. As bad as it may be, the church cannot blame the pastor *alone* because church governance was a shared process.

## Learning a lesson

He had a point. In one of my earlier churches, I had felt compelled to have an evangelistic series every year. Evangelism has always been my passion. What I did not comprehend was that it was not everyone else’s. I was pastoring a three-church district at the time. There was so much to accomplish with three churches

that I did not include the needed time for consultation and teamwork. I presented my enthusiastic evangelistic plan to the church board. We had recently, and successfully, conducted two lay-led Daniel seminars in the city in two different locations. It seemed to me that these entry-level events needed an evangelistic follow-up.

I presumed others in the church felt much the same way. To my surprise, the proposal met with considerable pushback. I was left “hanging alone.” Why? The church leaders were simply not ready to move into an evangelistic series as a follow-up. Also, they did not feel part of the planning process. People at the heart of church leadership desire to be included in the major decisions.

As the pastor, I had presumed they would approve. I learned that they needed time for reflection and inclusion. I did not yet appreciate these words of counsel: “When power is concentrated in the hands of a single person or small group, the potential assets of the rest of the team are squandered.”<sup>1</sup> Church leaders want their pastor to be successful, but they desire to be part of that success.

Later that week, I met with my head elder in his office. He told me why he viewed public evangelism as ineffective. He had witnessed many interests leave when the testing truths of our

faith were presented, and they did not come back. He also said that when people were baptized after a series, the members often never saw them in church again. He was a good and effective spiritual leader, a man of persuasive influence with a soul-winning track record. From his experience, personal Bible studies were the most effective way to bring people into the church and keep them there.

## A reset

Thus, as a young pastor and aspiring evangelist, I had made the mistake of not having this conversation first. It was time for a pastoral reset. This crisis compelled me to pray more and search for the meaning of my ministry. God used this incident to grow my ministry and to bring me to a deeper surrender to His will. “When you give all you know of yourself to all that you know of Him,” wrote Billy Graham, “then you can accept by faith that you are filled with the Spirit of God. That means that He can have all of you. Commitment actually is surrender—total, absolute, unconditional, irreversible surrender.”<sup>2</sup>

I then became busy developing a 12-month outline for evangelism. Seeking the Lord’s will led me to be more willing to work closely with my leaders. The head elder and I began to meet regularly. Together we fleshed out a new and in-depth

evangelistic schedule. To his credit, he bought into this new plan, which also included an evangelistic series at the end of the year. Next, we met with the team of elders. Finally, the proposal was placed on the agenda for a church board meeting for their consideration. The inclusive leadership process allowed all the church leaders to feel respected, and they appreciated being included. People in

revival and Holy Spirit power, a new force will begin to be seen in the church; and bear in mind, the power of the Holy Spirit always leads the church into mission. . . . In the process of leading the church forward, be certain to provide the spiritual momentum to accompany all that you do to bring the church to renewal.”<sup>3</sup> Most of those baptized remained faithful disciples for Christ.

concerns. The result is that money matters will not dominate the agenda and time.

### Conclusion

Let your leaders cast the vision with you, and you will see how rewarding it is. It takes humility, but it means you are becoming a better leader yourself. You are gaining influence. You are connecting with the very people who can help you

*People in leadership need to feel that their opinions are valued and that they can share their opinions openly without fear of retaliation.*

leadership need to feel that their opinions are valued and that they can share their opinions openly without fear of retaliation. As a pastor, I learned a valuable lesson on listening, planning, and patience. The process resulted in the leaders' ownership of and buy-in to the plan.

What followed was an overwhelming church board vote for the full-year evangelistic plan. When our leadership team saw a plan and became involved in the process of integrating personal and public evangelism, they had good reason to hope for evangelistic success.

The result of teamwork led to twice as many baptisms for the church as the previous year and in half the time. A church revival resulted as prayer ministries became a vital part of the plan and its success. “Prayer movements always precede powerful revivals. As more people begin to pray for

Hence, I learned six powerful lessons about “not hanging alone”:

1. Meet with your heavenly Father daily.
2. Meet with your head elder weekly.
3. Meet with your elders monthly.
4. Meet with your church board monthly.
5. Meet with your finance committee monthly prior to the board meeting.
6. Meet with your outreach committee monthly.

In regard to lesson five, remember that money issues create more tension in board meetings than any other item. A small finance committee made up of the pastor, treasurer, a person of influence, and the head elder or head deacon can resolve most perplexities. They can suggest resolutions that enable the board to much more quickly see their way to deal with financial

change the direction of the church to that of growth and revival.

Taking time to plan well helps you understand your church better. And the church understands you as the pastor so much better. The members begin to identify with you. They will love you for including them in mission. When you come to the church board and business meetings, you will have confidence you did not have before.

Both as a pastor and an evangelist, I have found that a sound planning process works for the benefit of the church. A church that prays and plans together will work together, and a pastor in a church like that will, yes, *never hang alone*. ❏

1 Paul Brantley, Dan Jackson, and Mike Cauley, *Becoming a Mission-Driven Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2015), 27.

2 Billy Graham, *Unto the Hills: A Daily Devotional* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1996), November 13.

3 Russell Burrill, *Waking the Dead* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2004), 56.



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# The leadership style of Ezra

**E**zra was a scribe. We often think of scribes as those working behind the scenes in dusty, dimly lit rooms, diligently copying and recopying ancient manuscripts. However, Ezra was more than that. After all, he does have a book of the Bible named after him. What made Ezra so special? Even though he was a scribe, he also stood tall as a great leader of God's people during a critical period in their history—when Judah was in Babylonian captivity, with their nation, city, and temple in ruins. This period would also become one of their most glorious because, through the intervention of God, they were given the opportunity to return home and rebuild their nation, city, and temple. It would be hard work. The people would be required to make great sacrifices in finances, abilities, and resources. And most importantly, the rebuilding would take faith! Such times require leaders of faith. Ezra proved to be such a leader.

Israel, both before and during their captivity, had neglected God and forgotten the importance of obedience to God. They needed someone to remind them of God and to return to His ways. They needed to learn how to accomplish God's will for their lives. They needed a determined leader who would lead them back to His will and worship in order that when

God lifted the captivity, they would know this redeeming God and be ready to build a new life out of the ruins of Jerusalem. Such a leader was Ezra.

"Now Ezra had determined in his heart to study the law of the Lord, obey it, and teach its statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10).<sup>1</sup> Four words here describe Ezra as a man of action; "determined," "study," "obey," and "teach." These four words describe what Ezra did with God's Law; as a scribe, he had worked closely with the Scriptures throughout his life. He knew his Bible well, and he understood its importance, especially when trying to lead God's people.

## One who studied God's law

Let's begin our study with the second word, "study." Ezra was determined in his heart to study the law of the Lord. The Hebrew word translated "study" carries the idea of "going somewhere frequently or regularly." It is descriptive of searching for something and similar to what Paul encouraged Timothy to do: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker that does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15, NIV). Christian leaders need to study the Bible time and time again and approach it habitually. They need

to sift through it, asking questions and finding answers. Without that intimate knowledge of God's Word, one cannot possibly know the law of the Lord or appreciate the way of Christ. If we do not know the way, how can we lead other people?

## One who obeyed the law

Another word used to describe Ezra's serious understanding of the Word of God is that he "obeyed" the law of the Lord. From Eden to Eden restored, one of the basic and central expectations of God from His people is obedience to His Word. It means "to do" or "to accomplish" God's will, fulfilling that which has been asked or commanded.

Speaking to disobedient King Saul, the prophet Samuel chided him, "'Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD?'" (1 Sam. 15:22, MEV). Samuel answered his own question: "To obey is better than sacrifice" (v. 22). One reason why God prefers obedience to sacrifice is that the former is the response of the heart, and the latter can be accomplished by money. For a person of means, "to sacrifice" might not be much of a sacrifice; he can purchase that sacrifice. Consider the widow and her two mites. She gave all that she had, and the Lord took note of her giving and called it a true and acceptable sacrifice. Rich people

normally do not give all that they have. However, when it comes to obedience, God expects everyone to make the same commitment to His law; that is, to strive to joyfully and completely fulfill all that He expects.

Obedience means to follow God's way by following His laws. For the Christian, it is not only about reaching our destination but also about doing it the right way. How you go about reaching your goal not only means arriving at your destination but also includes how you follow the rules of the road while you are on your way. After all, you will still live with the circumstances of what you do even if you make it home. If you are driving a car, you can reach your destination even if you speed; but if you get a ticket for speeding, you must pay the price for it. God wants everyone to get to heaven—but on His terms.

### One who taught the law

A third word that describes the relationship of Ezra to the law is that he was committed to “teach” the law. In other words, Ezra, as a leader, found that one of the principal duties in spiritual leadership is a willingness to teach the law to his people. Jesus encouraged His disciples to “know the truth” and experience its liberating force (John 8:32). One way the truth leads us to be free is when we share its beauty and legitimacy with others. And if we know the truth, we are also responsible for sharing it with others. The Hebrew word translated “teach” used in this verse in Ezra comes from a primitive root that means “to goad.” A farmer would lead his cattle by goading them; that is, by prodding them with a pointed stick. This rod supplied the incentive for the cattle to learn from the farmer. Similarly, the Christian teacher needs to goad,

or motivate, his or her flock and urge them to follow Christ. We certainly should not poke them with a sharp stick, but we should be ready to instruct, correct, and rebuke them from the Bible with kindness, humility, and love.

Unfortunately, most Christian leaders try to start with the third of these action words that describe Ezra and his leadership. They want to start with teaching without first studying and obeying God's Word. But if a leader personally does not study the Bible or follow God's will, how can he or she then teach others? How can we teach the law to others without first experiencing its blessings and truth ourselves, leading not only by words but by example? If we have studied God's Word and obeyed it—and therefore know it is real—how can we not keep it ourselves?

### One of determination


The most important action words concerning Ezra and his leadership is the first one mentioned in the Ezra passage. Ezra 7:10 begins with the affirmation that God's chosen leader “had determined in his heart.” Other translations render this word as “devoted” or “prepared his heart.” Regardless of how the word is rendered, the idea is to give oneself wholeheartedly to an endeavor such as leadership and, thus, to be “determined.”

This Christian idea of determination is like the devotion of a person who has so much faith in God and His Word that the person's faith is set in concrete and cannot be changed. Because Ezra was devoted, he was firmly established in his faith concerning the truth of God's law and fully committed to following God's way. In so doing, he could lead others along the same path. Ezra was determined to help Israel get back to the land of promise, away from the land

of bondage. Ezra's determination was Israel's motivation. Ezra was determined to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. Ezra's determination inspired God's people to attempt the incredible and achieve the impossible.

Today, Christian leaders need to have this same kind of determination. We see such determination in Jesus: “Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51, NIV). Whatever happened in His ministry—His teachings, miracles, rejections, betrayals—His mind was set to reach Jerusalem. The Cross was the distant milepost He should reach. Although He would encounter different people and problems and have opportunities to preach, teach, and heal, Jesus was determined to go to Jerusalem. Even though He knew full well that He was going to His own crucifixion and death, Jesus made a straight course to Jerusalem.

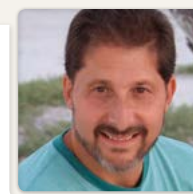
And Jesus expects His followers to have the same determination and follow and serve Him. Luke speaks of a few who had given Jesus excuses when He asked them to follow Him. Jesus finally said, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62, NIV). If we are going to plow a field, we have to look forward in order to plow a straight line. If we look back, our furrow will be crooked. If a person chooses to follow Jesus, he must keep his eyes on Christ so that he will leave behind a straight path.

Ezra set an example for his people to follow. He was determined. He was given to the study of God's Word. He was a disciple of obedience. He taught God's Word and His way to His people. Can our ministry be like that of Ezra? 

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture verses in this article are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible.



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# Shepherding is a team effort

A friend of mine asked me what I had observed during years of traveling and teaching in local churches. Without hesitation, I told him the thing that is most obvious throughout the worldwide body of Christ is that most pastors I meet are tired.

Having served in pastoral ministry for several years, I understand why they are exhausted. Pastors face unrelenting stress from caring for people. The constant demands on a pastor's time, the endless round of crises they must deal with, not to mention the pressure of juggling the burgeoning machinery of the church, all take their toll. Beyond these factors, people expect pastors to have an exemplary family because they are on display for all to see. All such situations contribute greatly to pastoral weariness.

Still, I believe the root of pastoral weakness today goes much deeper. For the most part, many clergy members misunderstand their function. I am convinced that the traditional view of the pastor's role—what they do and who they are—contributes greatly to the fatigue so many pastors experience. What do I mean by the *traditional view*? It is the idea that one person should run the church rather than a team of leaders. In my opinion, it is a major cause of pastoral fatigue.

Since most pastors reading these words serve alongside elders,

they might assume this does not apply to them. But churches in which elders jointly pastor the flock are few and far between. In part, this results from a misunderstanding of the word *pastor* itself. For most people, the word is a noun—a person who does all the pastoring of the people in a local church. But in the New Testament, it is not a noun (except in Ephesians 4:11) but a verb, translated by the English word *shepherd*. (The ESV version renders it as “care.”) That means that shepherding is not an office one person holds but a function that all elders should execute. While I do believe that there is a leader of the elder team (who may be called pastor), elders are those who jointly shepherd the flock, providing pastoral care. Pastors are called not only to lead, but, as Paul says in Ephesians 4:11, 12, God “gave some . . . pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry” (NKJV). They are supposed to prepare the church members to do the work. Jesus called all to be part of His work.

Whenever Scripture mentions pastors, or shepherds, it always refers to them in the plural. It is the elders who pastor the local church together. Nowhere in Scripture do we find the idea that one individual provides shepherding care to the flock while the other elders give business advice or counsel to the

pastor. The failure to grasp this is a central contributing factor to the high burnout rate among pastors today. They are trying to do alone what God intended to accomplish through a team.

This is not only biblical; it has practical benefits for all of the leaders in the church, not to mention their care for those in the flock. Moreover, being part of that church and community, local leaders know the needs best and the things that work or do not work in the church.

Our local church went through an extended season of untimely deaths of its members. Before one was buried, it seemed, another passed away, and it was very emotionally draining. But the collective ministry of the elders allowed our senior elder to carry the flock through that difficult time. As each elder ministered to the various families he or she had a relationship with, the community healed, and we were able to endure. I know I speak for our senior leader in saying that it would have been difficult to shepherd the body without an elder team committed to leading the flock through such a difficult ordeal.

## How churches usually view elders

As stated previously, most churches today have elderships, but the number of congregations

in which elders really function as biblical shepherds are very few. Instead, many churches view elders as those who handle the business side of the church or function as counselors to the pastor.

It is a blessing to any congregation to have elders who are astute in caring for the business aspect of the church. If a spiritual decision spills over into the business side of things, the elders weigh in. Otherwise, they do not have much involvement in other church issues.

In other churches, elders function as little more than counselors to the pastor. In this model, pastors may consult with the elders, but the pastor essentially makes all decisions and does all the work. While pastors are not required to receive counsel from the elders, Scripture encourages them to do so in accordance with Solomon's admonition, "in the multitude of counsellors there is safety" (Prov. 11:14, KJV). Wise pastors will avail themselves of the counsel of the elders. Moreover, by involving them in

the decision-making process, a pastor gains not only wisdom from the team but also support.

But such a model is dangerous in that it fosters pastoral independence. In some churches I have known, the pastor has announced major directional changes to the congregation without ever consulting with the other elders. It would have been wise to consult with them beforehand, yet the pastor was not required to seek their counsel, so the church did not view it as a problem.

What is the problem with both views about the function of the elders? While they might be astute in business and perceptive in giving counsel, they should, first and foremost, be shepherds, caring for the flock.

### Pastoral priority: Training elders

When I took the lead role of my home church some years ago, I had several things I sought to accomplish during my time there. But next to preaching and teaching the

gospel, my major focus consisted of training and equipping elders/shepherds. I knew a healthy church needs a team of elders who love the flock and care deeply for its needs. So, I set out a plan by which I could continually train individuals who were called to be elders. That way, the church would never lack shepherds to care for the needs of God's people.

The plan we used became known as the four Cs. Prospective elders must first be people of the highest *character* who share the same biblical *convictions* as the other elders. They also must be *competent* to teach and express their unique spiritual gifts. Finally, they must have *chemistry* with the other elders on the team, since elders must work closely together.

### The first C: Character

It goes without saying that a godly character is the most important component of being an elder. In the two lists Paul compiled in the pastoral letters, he makes it clear that elders are to be individuals who, above all, excel in godliness (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). Except for one (apt to teach), all of the other requirements for eldership are character traits. Elders must reflect the nature of Christ in their personal character not only in their ministry in the church but also in the management of their own homes. While all of God's people should aspire to such godly character, elders must excel in such matters.





A good friend of mine, a gifted Bible teacher who is now resting in Jesus, was known for saying, “What a man builds with his gift, he often destroys with his character.” The history of Christianity bears this out. Those who have based their ministry on a powerful gift without the corresponding character to sustain it have often seen everything come crashing down. It was the case with Saul, the first king of Israel, a highly gifted and talented man who, at least outwardly, exuded leadership. But crisis and mounting pressure soon revealed fissures in his character, and before long, he compromised. On the other hand, his successor, David, quietly developed that character that would sustain him when he ascended to the throne.

### **The second C: Conviction**

There needs to be doctrinal unity on an elder team. Elders must share the same convictions when it comes to their understanding of the truth of the gospel. That is not to suggest that an elder team must be perfectly united on every single subject. Nevertheless, they should strive to agree as much as possible. How else can they fulfill their duty to feed the flock unless they are in unity?

### **The third C: Competency**

Besides competency in teaching sound doctrine, elders must also be skilled in exercising the various spiritual gifts God has given them. A healthy team of elders will have various gifts that complement each other. It is vital that each elder learns to function uniquely in his or her God-given sphere. That will safeguard a team member from falling into the trap of being a cookie cut of the others. While they should all agree when it comes to the essentials of biblical doctrine, they should be diverse

when it involves the various gifts each expresses. In the eldership I am privileged to serve in, I appreciate the fact that the elders possess a variety of gifts.

### **The fourth C: Chemistry**

The fourth area that should characterize a healthy elder team is that of chemistry. Webster defines it as “a strong mutual attraction, attachment, or sympathy: interaction between people working together.” I used to think this was the least important of the four Cs, but through experience, I have come to realize it is just as vital as the other three.

### **The importance of training**

An elder training track served as the vehicle to evaluate and implement the four Cs in each potential elder’s life. It is a program that invited handpicked people in our congregation to study biblical leadership. The first and most important step was to ask the Father to give me potential candidates. Conducting the training one-on-one gave me the opportunity to assess the potential elder’s character, conviction, competency, and chemistry.

Jesus demonstrated the high priority of training other leaders by the formation of and focus on training the Twelve Apostles during His earthly ministry. Often, He withdrew from the crowds and focused on their training. He knew that, for His ministry to be ongoing, He had to have a small company of individuals who really understood His ministry and message and would share it with others. That meant that He had to give His time to leader development.

All pastors, especially those who do not yet have functioning elders shepherding the flock, need to prioritize the training of future

elders. It is good to define and think through the process beforehand. What materials will you use? How will you choose potential future elders and invite them to join a training process? One must answer these and many other questions like them before inviting people into such a process.

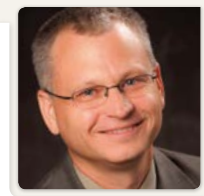
It is important that potential candidates understand that just because they are being asked to participate in this process does not guarantee they will become elders. If anything, it may confirm that a person is really not an elder but, perhaps, a deacon. In a leadership team on which I served, it became apparent after taking one man through the training process that he was really a deacon. It was important both to him and to us to make sure he served in the responsibility best suited to his spiritual gifts.

### **The blessing of shepherding together**

Shepherding the local church in which I serve alongside other shepherds has been one of the greatest joys I have experienced during 40 years of ministry. Above all, it has kept me from burnout. The blessing of working together with others with differing yet complementary gifts has been a safeguard not only for the team but for the entire church as well. People have remarked that after seeing and experiencing being shepherded by a team of elders, they do not want to go back to the traditional pastoral system.

I believe that senior pastors must make the training and appointment of elders one of the priorities of their leadership in a local church. If not, the demands of the flock leave them little time for discipling. Sadly, rare is the pastoral leader who gives priority to this all-important task. ❏

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# Paul at Athens:

## *A study in tactical leadership*

Every church leader prefers certain settings in which to minister. Speaking in different venues and varying cultures is often fraught with risk. And yet God often calls His spokespersons to do exactly that. Consider the experiences of apostle Paul.

In Acts 17, Paul arrived in Thessalonica and spent three Sabbaths in the synagogue explaining to the people from the Scriptures that “Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead” (v. 3).<sup>1</sup> Some Jews and a “great multitude of the devout Greeks” accepted the saving message of the gospel (v. 4). Evangelism had struck its victory note. But envious Jews gathered a mob against Paul and Silas, whom they accused as those “who have turned the world upside down” (v. 6). These gospel heralds escaped “by night to Berea,” where the evangelists found the people to be “fair-minded” and “many of them believed” (vv. 10–12). But the troublemakers stormed in from Thessalonica and again “stirred up the crowds” against Paul (v. 13). The believers sent Paul away to Athens, while Silas remained in Berea, along with Timothy, to continue studying with those “fair-minded” people.

Not one given to enjoy the ease of life, Paul forged ahead with his ministry while waiting for Silas and Timothy. Acts 17:16, 17 tells that Paul’s spirit “was provoked within him when he saw that the city [of Athens] was given over to idols.” That provocation led the apostle to launch his evangelistic proclamation in three directions simultaneously, with tactical skills born of the Holy Spirit. First, he worked in the synagogues, reasoning with the Jews. Second, he worked among the God-fearing Gentiles, wherever they could be found. Third, he spent time in the marketplace with the pagans, shopping or holding philosophic dialogues there.

### Jews

Of the three groups, Paul would have been naturally comfortable with his fellow Jews. They were acquainted with Scripture and shared a common background in worldview, Scripture, culture, language, eating, feasts, and ceremonial habits. Paul’s fellow Jews were family. As long as Paul was careful not to antagonize them with his distinctive Christian beliefs, the Jews were glad for his presence.

Paul was in a comfort zone. How easy it would have been for him to operate carefully among Jews without upsetting anyone. Had he worked more cautiously and conservatively in the synagogues around Asia Minor, he could have been a welcome celebrity among the Jews most anywhere. Additionally, he could have racked up a great number of conversions, so long as the required changes were minor. He could have felt really satisfied with incrementally deepening his flock’s spirituality, increasing their tithing, building up their outreach, and establishing their institutions. Paul could have spent the rest of his life in productive work and lived as a hero among his own Jewish people. But he was more mission-minded than that.

### God-fearing Gentiles

Paul refused to be satisfied with working only among his own people; he was conscious of his commission and calling by Jesus to be a messenger to the Gentiles. Yet, even then, had Paul been so inclined, he could have been much more comfortable working with the many God-fearing Gentiles that were around him. While working



with Gentiles might have been more difficult than working with Jews, the most difficult hurdles may have been swept away. After all, these Gentiles were God-fearing. Their worldview had previously undergone substantial changes. These Gentiles already possessed a foundation for Paul to build upon and had much-needed room for improvement. Therefore, Paul could have felt that he was indeed a missionary to the Gentiles and maybe even enjoyed the challenge of working among them because they did not necessarily share the same background, culture, language, and eating and purity habits. He could have convinced himself that he was living dangerously yet obediently to his commission. For Paul, however, this was not enough.

### **Pagans**

Paul's mind was singularly focused on Athens. At first sight of the great city and its famous idols dotting the streets everywhere, "his spirit was provoked within him" (v. 16). Why was Paul provoked by the city full of idols? Perhaps for three reasons.

First, he was provoked for God's sake. Here was a great city, known for its philosophical schools and rational discourses, given up completely to idol worship, with multiple idols beckoning men and women of reason to bow before them in worship, with false gods masquerading as the true God. Paul was legitimately provoked and upset for God's sake.

Second, it could be that Paul's discovery of Jesus and His saving grace, love, and truth led the apostle to be compassionate toward the people of Athens and reveal to them the true Creator-Redeemer God in whom "we live and move and have our being" (v. 28).

A third reason why Paul would be provoked at the sight of what he

saw in Athens is the infilling of the Holy Spirit. Paul was so constantly tuned in to the Holy Spirit that he was provoked at the sight of ignorance and the denial of the true God in preference to the emptiness of idols. Paul not only felt strongly about the situation but also was determined to do something about it. Out of step with the beliefs of his Jewish heritage, Paul believed that God wanted the Athenians to be saved as well. He understood the global mission concept of taking the gospel to those who were entirely unreached, including the idol-worshipping pagans. Paul knew that the God of the Cross is the God of all.

Paul went where people were: to the marketplace, to the city square, to the debating corners of Athens—wherever pagans congregated, wherever ignorance of the Creator-Redeemer God prevailed, and wherever worshipers congregated to bow to the "Unknown God" (vv. 22, 23). There, we might say, Paul formed the first global mission study center where he used the marketplace and the city square to study and test methods of reaching the hearts and minds of pagans in ways they would understand and respond to. He talked to people. He studied their literature, their poets. He studied

their gods. He probably asked many questions. Paul knew that he could not blindly dive into preaching to the Athenians the same way that he approached Jews or even God-fearing Gentiles. Through the Holy Spirit, Paul understood that the worldview of the Athenians required an entirely different approach to reach them.

The people at the marketplace reacted to Paul's investigation and speaking in a variety of ways. Some rejected him immediately, saying, "What does this babbler want to say?" (v. 18).

What Paul saw in Athens can be seen in our cities today. Our cities are still full of idols, even though they are less obvious than what Paul saw. Unfortunately, however, most of us are fully capable of walking through a city without being offended in the least by its idols. Where is our sense of God's honor? Where is our compassion for the people?

### **Studying his audience**

It seems that Paul did not know exactly how to reach the pagans in Athens. And evidently, he experienced a few fits and starts. But he learned how to reach them as he mingled with the people as one desiring their good. This direct contact led some people to want to

*We know that some people will reject the gospel, but we must do everything possible to ensure that before they reject it, they understand what they are rejecting.*

know more, until some said, “Hey, let’s listen to him. Bring him to the Areopagus.”

Luke pauses the story here to inform us that the people of Athens did nothing all day long but talk about and listen to the latest ideas (v. 21). Was he accusing the Athenians of being lazy or slothful? It seems more likely that he was referring to Athenians as thinkers and debaters. Paul may have been a little overawed by the reputation of the philosophers of Athens, causing him to call upon his eloquence, logic, and oratory, something he later regretted doing (1 Cor. 2:2).

When Paul’s moment arrived on Mars Hill, the Holy Spirit was at work in him by using his experience with the Athenian heritage—his study of their culture, philosophy, religion, literature, and worldview—to transform his method of speaking to the Athenians. But the apostle had not reckoned the

way the Holy Spirit would work through him. Paul thought that his oratorical skills and eloquence, his upbringing and his education under Gamaliel, would be his tools of effective communication. In reality, it was Paul’s education on the streets of Athens that the Holy Spirit was able to use.

Here lies an extremely important point of gospel communication. Paul’s depth of learning, his knowledge and eloquence, his logical thinking and preaching skills, were all-important. But at Athens, God used what Paul had learned on the streets of the city during his direct contact with the people. God used his observation of the people, their customs, their literature, and their religion and empowered Paul to reach out to the Athenians as one desiring their good. Note some key points in Paul’s experience:

1. *Paul respected the people for what they were.* Paul did not, in any way, disparage the false religion

or false gods of the Athenians. He gathered whatever points of good he could find, few as they were, and capitalized on them. He acknowledged the positive among them: “ ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious’ ” (Acts 17:22). F. F. Bruce, the New Testament scholar, points out that even though the practice of the times in a public oration, according to the ancient writer Lucian, was to discourage the use of “complimentary exordia [beginnings] to secure the goodwill of the Areopagus court,”<sup>2</sup> Paul opened his speech with complimentary words. Perhaps Paul was unaware of the convention, or maybe the compliment was mild enough to be allowed. Although the Athenian religion was misguided in every way, Paul noted their devotion. Caring about even misguided religious faith and conduct is more commendable than not caring at all.



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2. *Paul communicated a respectful attitude toward the Athenian's faith.* Note his gentle words: " 'As I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship' " (v. 23).

Paul had the right answers to the religious issues that plagued Athenian life, but Paul did not present himself as such. Instead, he cared for the people and desired their good.

3. *Paul carefully crossed the line between what one is and what one should become.* The line is very delicate. He had shown that Athenians were religious. He had shown that he cared for their culture and belief. He had told them of his respect for their heritage, even though such heritage involved the worship of the " 'Unknown God' " (v. 23). From awareness and appreciation of their culture, Paul gently moved the line and proclaimed, with much love and care, "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth" (v. 24).

## Paul's appeal

Paul now was reaching out with his appeal, a step in which he embraced the dynamic principle of inclusion: "Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead" (vv. 29–31).

One can almost imagine a bit of squirming at the Areopagus. Paul just crossed a line that he had carefully avoided to this point. He had avoided it because crossing

this line too soon would close the minds of the people against what he had to say. But he also knew that, eventually, he had to cross the line and share the inevitable consequences of continuing to ignore the true God.

Luke provides two reactions to Paul's closing words. Some sneered at the idea of resurrection. Others said they wanted to hear Paul again on the matter. But the central point in this story for our purposes is that *all of them had actually listened.* And that was Paul's hope from the beginning.

We know that some people will reject the gospel, but we must do everything possible to ensure that before they reject it, they understand what they are rejecting. For the Athenians who rejected the gospel, Paul, by his method of working among them and strategic use of what he had studied and learned of them, ensured that they understood that a God existed whom they did not know but who had created them, still loved them, and was merciful to them in spite of their ignorance but that judgment day was coming, and there was verifiable evidence for all of this in the resurrection of Christ.

## Treasure of knowledge

What is the great takeaway for us from Paul's experience in Athens? It is how to approach an unreached group of nonbelievers. Paul speaks of it himself, writing later to the Corinthians: "For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:2–5).

Paul abandoned oratorical strategy and philosophical contentions that he used in the Areopagus. He recognized that his reliance on his skill as a speaker had profited little. Meeting logic with logic, philosophy of the world with the wisdom from above, Paul could have broken the Athenian school of human self-sufficiency with the power that comes from above. But in the process, he realized he would have made only enemies. So, he placed before the Athenians the great Creator God " 'in whom we live and move and have our being' " and who " 'commands all men everywhere to repent' " (Acts 17:28, 30) in order to receive eternal life.

Through his tactical leadership—direct contact with people, the study of their culture, and respect for their beliefs—Paul managed something notable among the pagans in Athens. He avoided irritating his listeners. He got all of them to listen, he got many of them to believe, and he got some of them to follow (vv. 32–34). Ellen White comments, "Had his oration been a direct attack upon their gods and the great men of the city, he would have been in danger of meeting the fate of Socrates. But *with a tact born of divine love*, he carefully drew their minds away from heathen deities, by revealing to them the true God, who was to them unknown."<sup>3</sup>

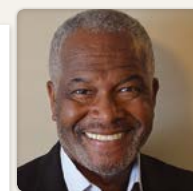
This heaven-inspired tactical leadership is a model we need to pay attention to, even as we go about meeting multitudes in the diverse Areopagus settings of our time. ❏

1 All Scripture passages in this article are quoted from the New King James Version.

2 F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text With Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 380.

3 Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Ass., 1911), 240, 241 (emphasis added).

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# Spiritual leadership: *What is “spiritual” about being spiritual?*

My friends, you are spiritual. So if someone is trapped in sin, you should gently lead that person back to the right path” (Gal. 6:1).<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the word *spiritual* has been bandied about in such a cavalier fashion that it has come to mean pretty much anything that the person using it wants it to mean.

The word, for instance, is often used to mean “holy.” Yet, even then, there is enough vagueness about its definition to assume it means something so ethereal that, although the reader or listener cannot quite define it, it nevertheless allows them to experience a warm glow, knowing that it sounds good enough, and godly enough, to be desirable. In fact, at times it has taken on a mystical, even other-worldly meaning. “That person is very spiritual” sounds as if the person has one foot in the realm of the supernatural.

In *Ontario Highlights*, a commentary on a constituency meeting stated that it was “one of the most spiritual and orderly” the author had ever attended.<sup>2</sup> What, exactly,

is a spiritual constituency session? Did the writer mean that the session was one where everyone was in a constant misty-eyed attitude of prayer? Was it a session where everyone was smiling happily with no disagreements or outbreaks of anger? Was it “spiritual” because there was no hint of unethical politicking? What made it “spiritual”?

In the May/June 2011 issue of *Faith Today*, Carey Theological College was advertising a master of arts in spiritual formation. I asked myself, “What is spiritual formation?” Is spirituality something that can be taught? I have a mental picture of graduates from this program sitting in their robes and hoods, eyes bright, faces shining from their newly formed spirituality. I can imagine parents, anxious for their progeny to become good people who contribute to the Christian mission, encouraging their children to get formed into spiritual beings.

An advertisement on the back page of the May/June 2011 *Canadian Messenger* encouraged young people to study at the then Canadian University College. It read: “It’s about your university

experience. . . . It’s about where you can feel at home. . . . It’s where you can grow academically, physically and spiritually.” What does it mean to grow spiritually? In a Christian context, it seems that if you throw in the word *spiritual*, there’s enough succulent bait to get folks to bite, believe, and embrace.

One article stated, “A survey of reviews in 2005 by McCarroll . . . dealing with the topic of spirituality gave twenty-seven explicit definitions, among which ‘there was little agreement.’ ”<sup>3</sup> I found that number astounding but not surprising, because when I have asked people what they meant by *spirituality*, they struggled to explain it, actually.

Based on that Wikipedia article, it seems that, for some, spirituality has to do with a personal belief in the supernatural or with a quest for meaning in life. For others, it’s about a sense of wonderment and reverence toward the universe.

## **Spiritual in Scripture**

How, then, does the Word of God use the term *spiritual*?

In the Bible, the concept of *spirituality* originates with the Holy Spirit, not with humans. In 1 Corinthians 12, the “spiritual gifts” are given by the Holy Spirit. We do not set the standards for what is


spiritual. Spirituality comes from God alone.

Ephesians 6:12 speaks of “spiritual” forces of evil, apparently referring to supernatural forces in opposition to the forces of good.

taking our cue from the Holy Spirit and keeping in step with Him.

### **The story of Barnabas**

Meanwhile, the story of Barnabas models spirituality for



*Being spiritual is about being filled with God's love; it is about how we relate to others, and whether we build them up for the kingdom or drive them away from it.*

First Corinthians 10:3, 4 refers to “spiritual” food, the manna, as well as the drink, supplied by God to the Israelites. Galatians 5:17 declares that the “spiritual” nature originates with God. Speaking of the law of God, Paul in Romans 7:14 said it is “spiritual,” meaning that it originated with God. The law describes perfect action. Paul saw himself, in contrast, as unspiritual—a prisoner of his own imperfect urges. In 1 Corinthians 2:13, 14, “spiritual” truths are taught by the Holy Spirit, and, unless one has the Holy Spirit, one does not stand a chance of understanding or accepting spiritual things. Galatians 5:25, 26 makes it clear that being “spiritual” involves a strong and purposeful link with the Holy Spirit and that every Christian is challenged to become spiritual,

us. He is an excellent example of a spiritual person. His real name is Joseph (Acts 4:36), but his nickname is Barnabas, meaning “son of encouragement” (NIV) or the “one who encourages others.”

In contrast, Acts 9:26 presents a picture of Saul as a man feared by the disciples. Saul is like that manager at work who is constantly on your back, making life miserable, that manager who treats others favorably but seems to intend to harm you. Saul has betrayed you with gossip, but now he wants to come to your church.

Despite Saul's poor reputation among Christians, Barnabas protected the converted Saul. He became Saul's advocate. He was willing to give Saul a chance. Barnabas was willing to take a risk with this man who had persecuted the church.

Barnabas was not swayed by whispering hearsay. He heard and saw how Saul had preached and, thus, Barnabas came to his own



conclusion. He listened to what Saul had to say about his conversion and gave him the benefit of the doubt. He put the best spin on Saul's motives. Instead of looking for an opportunity to give a harsh, heavy-handed condemnation of Saul, he used this golden opportunity to harness Saul's talents. Barnabas had a sense of fairness that was not swayed by other loyalties (Acts 15:36–40).

Barnabas was not perfect. In Galatians 2:13, Peter, unable to resist his xenophobic urges, withdrew from the Gentile Christians and “even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.” The word “even” is used because it was, probably, uncharacteristic of Barnabas.

According to the account of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, if it were not for Barnabas and Saul (now Paul), every Christian male in the centuries thereafter would have to be circumcised and obey the law of Moses in order to be baptized and join the church.

### The sum of the matter

So, here's the punchline: Being spiritual is about being filled with God's love; it is about how we relate to other and whether we build them up for the kingdom or drive them away from it.

Being spiritual is about being filled and led by the Spirit and having the fruit of the Spirit. A spiritual person, in Galatians 5:22, 23, is one who is loving, kind, self-controlled, gentle, humble, and has a sense of peace and joy.

Being spiritual is not about looking holy or throwing out your TV or never having fun or constantly praying or smiling or being a doormat. It is about *not* being conceited and *not* provoking or envying others. Being spiritual is about being humble and godlike in the way that we relate to others because we show our love for God by the way we love others.

Perhaps Paul was thinking about Barnabas when he appealed to the Galatians (Gal. 6:1), giving them a practical illustration of spirituality in action: “My friends, you are spiritual. So if someone is trapped in sin, you should gently lead that person back to the right path.” That is, you who have been touched by the Spirit, not you who can recite large chunks of the Bible; not you who can explain the 2,300-day prophecy of Daniel 8:14; not you who know how to interpret the beasts in Revelation; not you who have been members for 20, 30, 40 years or can who recite the church manual. No—“you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness” (NKJV). Not only restore, but restore with a spirit of gentleness, a spirit of tact, kindness, and love.

### The restorer

When my children were younger and I disciplined them, I always tried to remember that I was a child once. How would I feel being spoken to harshly or being put down?

The restorer avoids gossip and keeps their talking and advice to the minimum. Restoring is not lecturing. The spiritual restorer puts the best interpretation on the actions and motives of the fallen. The spiritual person is not looking for an opportunity to give a harsh, heavy-handed condemnation or to display their own superiority. They are not accusatory, nor do they demonstrate a holier-than-thou attitude. Rather, they are sympathetic and tactful, carefully selecting their words and monitoring their body language.

Most of all, they are humble. Restoration is not for those who feel spiritually superior.

### Spirituality?

So next time you hear someone talk about those who are “spiritual”

or about a “spiritual” program or “spiritual” event, ask yourself whether they are talking about a spirituality of their own creation or about true spirituality, which only comes from God. Is it a spirituality that is relational? Is the spiritual program, or the spiritual degree program, designed to help us be a better neighbor, parent, spouse, or friend—or even just a better person in general?

Is the spiritual atmosphere at a convention or conference one that encourages us to be like Jesus, the Lamb who submitted to God and, ultimately, to death on a criminal's cross? In addition, does the spiritual climate in your church emulate not only the gentle Jesus but also the One who fearlessly spoke out against injustice?

True spirituality is seen in the way we relate to others. It is seen in the way we treat others; that is, do we treat them with fairness and tact; with kindness, love, and compassion? It is seen in the way we advocate for the less fortunate, those who are looked down upon or maligned. It is seen in the way we respect all, not just those with position, power, or money. It is seen in the respectful way we relate to those of a different ethnic background, realizing that there is only one race, the human race. True spirituality comes out of a recognition that God is like a mother hen gathering her chicks, wishing only good for them all. True spirituality conducts one's life in step with God's intentions: the salvation and restoration of all. ▣

1 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture in this article is from the Contemporary English Version.

2 Halsey Peat, “The Last Word: Halsey Peat's Perspective on the 34th Constituency Meeting,” *Ontario Highlights*, Spring/Autumn 2017, 12.

3 Wikipedia, s.v. “spirituality,” last modified June 6, 2019, 2:01, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirituality.

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# Redistributed life:

## *When a church closes its doors*

**F**or everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

- a time to be born, and a time to die;
- a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
- a time to kill, and a time to heal;
- a time to break down, and a time to build up;
- a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
- a time to mourn, and a time to dance (Eccl. 3:1–4, ESV).

Birth and death are normal parts of life—but normal does not mean easy. Death takes collective forms, too, such as the end of life for an entire church family. Organizations, like people, have life cycles—they are born, they mature, and they die. In this third phase, the best of them rebrand so that the third phase is not the final phase. Churches have cycles or seasons too. As living systems, churches partake in predictable structural dynamics that we can observe and describe. Genesis 8:22 states, “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease”

(NIV). In other words, winter can turn into spring (see Song of Sol. 2:11, 12). Winter may signal death, but it can also spark a resurrection. The more difficult challenge is recognizing the work of the Spirit in and through such patterns of change.

A church is more than a human system because it enthrones the Spirit, who works in ways beyond our understanding. In this brief examination of the demise of a church, we will consider how using different lenses can shed unique light on the experience of church closure.

### Is revival possible?

Before closing a church, the local pastor, church administrators, and church members should prayerfully analyze all possible options that might have the potential to revive it. They should consider community involvement activities, a variety of outreach activities, Bible studies, planting a new congregation, or moving to a new location where they can start with new vision and activities. Dedicated prayer and careful planning may give them options besides closing the doors. The simple act of coming together to pray and brainstorm many times bears unexpected results. However,

if the church does not seem to grow and the limited number of local members cannot sustain the programs and expenses, eventually they need to consider shutting the doors.

### People of the dream

A faith community faces a unique question in such moments because we are people of the dream. We know that the end is never the end, and we realize that our God is a God of deliverance. He is able to do miraculous things! But that awareness can make facing reality more difficult. We always hope that God will come through in amazing ways.

Realizing that He can raise the dead, we live in a strange space between the real and ideal, between our hopes and fears. What is required is a clear and discerning spirit to see what God is doing in such transitional spaces. It helps to know that God loves transitional spaces—both endings and beginnings—because of the way they shape us. His deliverance of Israel, after all, was a long, slow process through the desert. He did not instantly transport them from Egypt to the land of promise. It was step by painful step as a new generation was born in the desert.

## How we started

In 2013 my wife and I arrived in Thunder Bay in North Ontario to pastor a church that had experienced some difficult leadership dynamics but was ready to make another start. We came to a graying and small, but hopeful, congregation who occupied a building that the church had called home for 128 years. My wife and I shared the pastoral work while I also taught

that had to carry those costs had shrunk dramatically.

Our first task was to determine whether any hope existed for renewal in the building. That would be impossible without greater numbers, but we also discovered that people were tired. They had little energy for outreach and, thus, growth. That raised a new necessity: get rid of the building. After 18 months of visioning and process-

to 18 months to prepare for our church's funeral.

## Planning the end

As our leadership team began to plan for the closing of our church, we discussed what needs our people would have. We talked about theological perspectives on death and about endings, beginnings, and legacies. Soon we felt that the Lord gave us John 12:24 as an anchor



*When a neighborhood church closes its doors, its life is not lost—only redistributed.*

at a couple of theological schools.

From the beginning, we knew that our opportunities and time were limited. It was change or die. The aging building was a particular challenge because, as a symbol of the past, it anchored a particular approach to congregational life and a set of traditions and ways of being the church. Those traditions shaped a culture that did not feel so welcoming in the modern world. And the building came with the challenges of any old structure—a need for maintenance, insurance, and heating—while the membership

ing, we found a new ministry who needed the space.

That change launched us into a new location. But the energy level remained the same, and we lost two key couples when they retired and moved. Suddenly we realized that with only a few members—clearly not enough to support all church services and expenses—we could not maintain our current ministry with the people we had, and my and my wife's job descriptions had suddenly expanded to fill new gaps. Our ministry was no longer sustainable. We had a year

point: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (ESV). Eventually, we realized that the closing of a church requires some kind of funeral. Something real but hard to define will die, and it has scattered survivors. There is much to grieve and, yet, much to celebrate.

Our first step was to map out a timeline. We set a tentative date for our final service eight months down the road. The second step was to consider what Bible narratives would be most helpful for our



people as they faced the transition together. What encouragement would they require? What did they need to know about transition, grief and loss, new beginnings? During our departure from the building, where some had worshiped for 75 years, we had already cycled through some of this. Now we would do it again, for a different kind of loss.

### **The announcement**

The most important phase of the transition would begin in January, when we would share the need to close the church and announce the date of the final service. The closure would mean very different things for various people. Some embrace change, and some avoid it. We anticipated a particular kind of pain and trauma for some who had made the church family the center of their Christian experience for decades. The reality was that the congregation fell into at least three broad groups in its orientation to endings and beginnings.

The first group was our elderly, ranging in age from the late 60s into the 90s. Perhaps because this group has less energy to invest in change and learning new ways of being takes energy, most of our elderly members did not easily welcome change.

Our middle-aged members found it easier. Middle-agers, in general, are more likely to adjust well to new spaces and faces. Because social and other networks are generally maximized in our middle years, this group seems to have more options. Middle-agers have friends in other congregations, and their children may attend other churches. The closing of a church is generally easier on those in middle age.

The young adults adapted most readily to change. For most young adults, the church is not the center

of their social life. It tends to be another spoke on the wheel. They will most easily find a place to land after this ending.

Another consideration was the process of grief itself. The speed at which people move through grief, like their orientation to change, is highly personal and depends in part on the way they have negotiated earlier losses. Some move through grief quite rapidly. Others will get stuck and may never completely let go. The latter will require our help and encouragement the most. We need to do a lot of listening, and they may require the assistance of a grief counselor.

### **The final weeks**

The six weeks before the last service were the most critical. Realizing the strength of our congregation leaning on each other, in our final month, we offered two extended fellowship times after the service, including a light meal. By Easter, we were in the final stretch.

The first worship service following Easter, we considered Jesus' dispatching the disciples in John 20. The great sending of the church was at its dispersal after the fall of Jerusalem. The temple, which had anchored Jewish worship for centuries, was no more. Although an earth-shattering shift, it was also an invitation to God's people to realize concretely that He does not dwell in buildings made by human hands. We were reminded that our fellowship is a spiritual reality, not a human institution.

In the last worship service of April, we considered the theme of failure from John 21. Some of our people felt that they were complicit in the doors closing. Had we failed as a church? What might that mean? We needed perspective. Even the cross can look like a failure, but in the weakness of God, we find our strength. In this

transitional space, we heard Jesus asking us, "Do you love Me?" Our most important call was not our preservation of the building for God but our participation in the mystery of God. (And, of course, we should continue that participation in another congregation.)

The following service, we considered the concept of transitions. Opening with Ecclesiastes 3, we talked about Israel's journey to the Promised Land. We discussed grief and loss and the tension of living in between. Finally, we ended with Philippians 3 and how Paul suffered the loss of all things for the sake of knowing Jesus better.

The next service, we discussed Pentecost. Jesus ascended and rules over heaven and earth as King and one day will return to rule in a physical kingdom. But His rule begins now and manifests itself in a special way through the church as a sign and a foretaste of His kingdom. Then we explored the place of the church in God's plan and our need to continue to participate in the life of the Spirit. The church in our city would continue to thrive.

### **The last service**

The final service was a lengthy one. We opened it by lighting a large candle, representing the life of our little church community. We then asked for some of our oldest members to share memories. Both my wife and I spoke from Scripture, offering formal words of encouragement. Structured readings served as prayers of confession, faith, and hope. I spoke from Philippians 3 with an emphasis on the "one thing [we continue to] do" (see v. 13).

At the close of the service, we asked everyone to stand and form a large circle. After we handed out small candles, three of our older members lit their candles from the large one at the front; then one individual blew it out. The life of

our church was over. The elders then passed the light of the large candle, now gone, on to every small candle. The life of our congregation had come to an end, but the life of Christ burned brightly in each of us.

### Moving on

We gave members hope and options to choose from. People who have been connected to a church for a long time can get hurt or discouraged. Not only do they need time to process, accept, and heal, they also require ideas on how to start over again. When a church closes, it is important to offer the members a variety of solutions that they can consider. It is also vital to offer emotional support for a period. We encouraged them to phone each other and pray together, and we constantly checked on them and prayed with them. Fellowship meals took place

occasionally, during which they could see and support each other. We suggested a variety of ideas, including the possibility of attending another congregation; the idea of starting a small study, prayer, or fellowship group; and so on.

David Whyte writes that “courage is the ability to cultivate a relationship with the unknown; to create a form of friendship with what lies around the corner over the horizon—with those things that have not yet fully come into being.”<sup>1</sup>

Churches come and go, but the body of Christ endures in the world. A helpful image for me is the mushroom. The mushroom is a rhizome. Rhizomes spread by sending out networks of roots in the soil. You water your lawn one evening, and it’s all green grass. The next morning a full-grown mushroom appears. Where did it come from? Its life was hidden below the soil.

When the conditions were right, it emerged. Tomorrow it will be gone. But the hidden life endures, sustained by the creative power of God.

When a neighborhood church closes its doors, its life is not lost—only redistributed. Older members become pillars in another church and find new missions and ministries. Likewise, the fruit of years of faithfulness endures, manifest in lives changed, believers grown to maturity, neighborhoods transformed by the love of Jesus. Truly, as Robert Browning put it, “All that is at all, lasts ever, past recall; Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure.”<sup>2</sup> ❖

1 David Whyte, *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2001), 102.

2 Robert Browning, “Rabbi Ben Ezra,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43775/rabbi-ben-ezra>.

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## Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods

by Jonathan Brooks, Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2018.

**C**hurch *Forsaken* is the best book I have ever read on how a church needs to minister to their community.

The author, Pastor Jonathan Brooks, ministers in the same community he grew up in—and presently lives and raises his family in. What sets this book apart from all the others I have read is that Brooks writes from the perspective of a neighborhood resident to the actual community that he and his church are ministering in. Additionally, he tells of unique experiences in teaching youth and as an art and architecture teacher. He also shares insights from his master of divinity in Christian community development.

What I love most about this book is that Brooks powerfully challenges local churches to rediscover that ministering to their neighbors means loving their neighborhoods *as well*. Pastor Brooks skillfully unpacks, verse by verse, Jeremiah 29:4–7, 11 into seven different practices, which he covers more specifically in two chapters apiece:

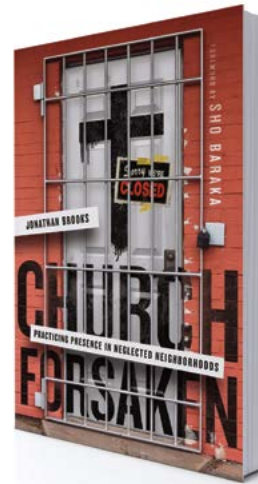
1. Reside where you don't want to be: Place
2. Return to previously forsaken places: Position
3. Reconnect to the whole gospel: Plan
4. Reestablish the value of place: Place
5. Remember the poor and marginalized: People
6. Remind one another of our collective power: Purpose

7. Reorient our vision to see like God: Perspective

In the book, he skillfully weaves personal, neighborhood, and community stories and incidents of his own as examples of how to—and not to—be effective in ministering to our communities.

Finally, Pastor Brooks rounds out the book with examples of how other churches and ministries are revitalizing and investing in their communities with not just their money but their time, their hearts, and, most importantly, God's love.

Brooks, in the introduction to his book, wrote about both how he came up with the title to his book and the reason why he wrote it: "Jon Fuller, while director of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, said, 'There are no God-forsaken places, just church-forsaken places.' While he was speaking of the church being absent in some of the remotest places in the world, I echo that sentiment for the neglected neighborhoods in cities right here in America. Don't get me wrong: there is no shortage of established church buildings or new congregations being planted in these communities. However, there is a shortage of community ownership and genuine church partnership resulting in community transformation. The church often exists in these communities either as fortresses built to keep the struggles of the community



on the outside or as patronizing social-service entities prescribing answers for a community without ever listening" (15).

The author, over and over again, reminds the reader that trying to separate, ignore,

or minister to the neighbor without ministering to their neighborhood is ultimately ineffective.

As I read this book, I was constantly reminded of the rebukes God, writing through the prophet Isaiah, wrote to God's people—to all followers of Jesus: " 'Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow' " (Isa. 1:17, NIV).

Pastor Jonathan Brooks does an amazing and memorable job of reminding all of us, from professional ministers to new church members, that saying the words "I love you" means rolling up our sleeves by not just ministering to those in our churches but ministering to, investing in, and revitalizing our neighborhoods and communities as well.

*Church Forsaken* is a book that, if taken to heart, can be used to change, evangelize, and win the hearts and minds of an entire community to Christ! 🙌

—Reviewed by Omar Miranda, an author, lay pastor, and youth counselor residing in Plainville, Georgia, United States.



## ► Church leaders—present and past—shine brightly

*Men and women who have lived wisely and well will shine brilliantly, like the cloudless, star-strewn night skies. And those who put others on the right path to life will glow like stars forever.*

—Daniel 12:3, *The Message*



Barry Black

**New York, United States—** Barry C. Black, PhD, DMin, 62nd Chaplain of the United States Senate, has been named Becket's 2019 Canterbury Medalist for his honorable defense of religious liberty for people of all faiths. Becket honored Black with the 2019 Canterbury Medal at its annual Gala in New York on Thursday, May 23.

The Canterbury Medal, Becket's highest honor, recognizes an individual who has demonstrated courage and commitment to defending religious liberty in the United States and around the world.

Becket is a nonprofit, public-interest legal and educational institute with a mission to protect the free expression of all faiths. The Canterbury Medal draws its name from one of history's most dramatic

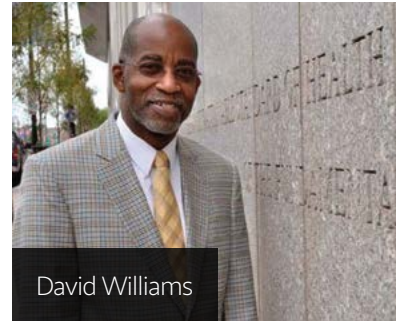
religious liberty standoffs occurring between Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas à Becket, the law firm's namesake, and King Henry II of England.

Chaplain Black has served as Senate chaplain since 2003. First-ever Seventh-day Adventist and African-American Senate Chaplain, he is the spiritual advisor for not only 100 of the most powerful lawmakers in the nation but also their staff and families—a combined constituency of around 6,000 people. Each morning as he opens the Senate with a prayer, Black sets the discourse for the day in one of the highest chambers in the nation, in turn setting the spiritual tone of the country.

"Few spiritual leaders are as gifted as Chaplain Black in providing caring, courageous ministry in a pluralistic religious environment," said **Mark Rienzi**, president of Becket. "For almost two decades, our nation has benefited from his chaplaincy and this year we humbly thank him for his work to safeguard religious liberty."

The annual Canterbury Gala is attended by the world's most distinguished religious leaders and religious liberty advocates. [NAD/Becket Media Relations]

**Washington, DC, United States—** David Williams, PhD, MPH, MDiv, a consultant and honorary associate director of Health Ministries for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, was 1 of 100 persons elected on April 30, 2019, to be members of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). He is the first



David Williams

Photo: Kent Dayton, Harvard Chan School

Seventh-day Adventist elected to this body.

Williams serves as the Florence Sprague Norman and Laura Smart Norman Professor of Public Health and chair of the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, as well as professor of African and African American Studies and Sociology at Harvard University.

**Peter Landless**, General Conference Health Ministries director, said of Williams, "He has intensively researched the often-ignored but inestimably important areas of health disparities, inequities, and of discrimination and is an acknowledged, leading world expert in these conversations. We have been blessed and grateful that David and his wonderful wife, Opal, graciously and faithfully share cutting-edge insights on spirituality and holistic health. They make the difference!"

Loma Linda University president **Richard Hart** added, "As both an alumnus and current board member, Dr. Williams has been closely connected with Loma Linda University Health for many years. His contributions to understanding social behaviors have been foundational, and we add our



congratulations to this important recognition by the NAS.” [Mark A. Kellner, *Adventist Review*/Harvard Chan School]



Don Schneider

**Texas, United States—Don C. Schneider**, MA, former president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church North American Division (NAD), passed away May 23, 2019, in Texas. He was 76.

Schneider served as NAD president for 10 years. He was elected to the office in 2000 at the General Conference Session in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Prior to this, he served as Lake Union Conference president for almost six years.

“Don was ‘the Jesus man.’ There is no more eloquent statement that can be made,” said **Daniel R. Jackson**, current NAD president. “He traveled throughout the NAD and the world declaring that Jesus was his best Friend. His loss will never be equated with being forgotten. He was a ‘one of a kind’ man and leader.”

**Juan Prestol-Puésan**, current General Conference treasurer and former NAD treasurer, said he had the pleasure of working with Schneider for nine years. “He was a

man of impeccable integrity and a balanced, spiritual leader who was always engaged with people and issues,” said Prestol-Puésan.

Schneider is survived by his wife and partner in ministry, Marti, as well as family and friends. [NAD Communications]



Harold Baptiste

**Baltimore, Maryland, United States—Harold Wilson Baptiste**, MA, former vice president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, passed away May 25, 2019, in Baltimore, Maryland, at the age of 81. Born in Grenada, Baptiste’s burdens for urban ministry and training the next generation of church leaders guided his ministry.

Baptiste was the longest-serving executive secretary of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, active from 1990 to 2002, before taking the position of general vice president at the General Conference from 2002 to 2005.

**Ted N. C. Wilson**, president of the General Conference, recalls Baptiste’s judicious leadership and investment in the gospel. “Pastor Baptiste was a very balanced

administrator and a fine friend . . . a very spiritual person. He was much appreciated for his quiet and statesmanlike approach to his work. It was a privilege to know him and Shirley and to work with him over many years.”

**Jan Paulsen**, former General Conference president, remembers Baptiste’s exceptional contributions to world church administration: “Harold was to me a colleague who had an extraordinary clarity of vision and commitment. He was a counselor whose judgment I valued highly.”

Baptiste is survived by his wife and partner in ministry, Shirley, as well as family and friends. [Georgia Standish, NAD News]



Samuel DeShay

**Columbia, Maryland, United States—Samuel Lee DeShay**, MD, DMin, MA (Systematic Theology), former director of Health Ministries for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, passed away May 7, 2019, in Columbia, Maryland, at the age of 86. DeShay was one of the first African-Americans called to Africa by the General Conference, serving from 1961 to

1973. His positions included medical director at the Ahoada County Hospital in Rivers State, Nigeria, and Masanga Leprosy Hospital in Sierra Leone.

An internal medicine physician, hospital administrator, long-term missionary, trained

minister and theologian, and classical concert pianist, Samuel DeShay's life inspired countless people. Tributes at the funeral were shared by a litany of medical doctors, as well as **Ted N. C. Wilson** (General Conference president), **G. Alexander Bryant** (North

American Division secretary), **T. Marshall Kelly** (WJOU Chaplain, Oakwood University), and **Ted Jones** (retired president, Atlantic Union Conference). DeShay is survived by his wife and partner in ministry, Bernice, as well as family and friends. [*Ministry*]

## ► Church leaders pass on the baton

*Don't let anyone think little of you because you are young. Be their ideal; let them follow the way you teach and live; be a pattern for them in your love, your faith, and your clean thoughts.*

—1 Timothy 4:12, *TLB*

responsibility of being the next leaders of the church.

"#Ask2019" is part of the five-year theme of the SSD Youth Department, "Pass It On."

**Gary Blanchard**, youth director for the General Conference of

your heart. Live dangerously for God!"

Delegates to the youth leadership summit joined various activities and attended breakout classes to get acquainted with ways that they can use their skills to serve the church.

The SSD Youth Department partnered with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) to empower youth to become a volunteer workforce that can be tapped by the agency during relief operations. Other church entities, such as media ministries, health, communication, One Year in Mission, and Integrated Evangelism Lifestyle, collaborated with the youth department to present options for service that would allow young people to integrate it into the life of the church effectively.

SSD Youth Ministries director **Jobbie Yabut** acknowledged the role parents play in the lives of their children: "This meeting with young people would have never been successful were it not for the parents. They are the ones who dedicated their sons and daughters to become part of the movement that will prepare them for leadership," he said. [*Southern Asia-Pacific Division/Adventist Review*]

Photo: Southern Asia-Pacific Division Youth Department



**Bacolod City, Philippines—**Church leaders at the Southern Asia-Pacific Division (SSD) Youth Leadership Summit at Central Philippine Adventist College, in Bacolod City, Philippines, challenged more than 1,600 Adventist young men and women to bravely ask God for wisdom and faith to do mission and take up the

Seventh-day Adventists, shared his excitement as he encouraged delegates to face these challenges and live radically for mission. "We have to ask ourselves what we want to do for the Lord," Blanchard said. "God has placed a passion and desire in our hearts to do something. What does He want you to do? Whatever it is, do it with all





## ► Church leaders meet in collaboration

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!*

—Psalm 133:1

History was made in April 2019 when a delegation of United States (US) regional conference presidents—historically African American Adventist Church administrative regions—traveled to Nairobi, Kenya, for a summit with Adventist Church leaders of the East-Central Africa (ECD) and West-Central Africa (WAD) Divisions and the Adventist University of Africa (AUA) vice-chancellor. The delegation also included the executive secretary of the North American Division (NAD), the Regional Affairs director of the US-based Pacific Union, and three regional conference treasurers.

Titled “Transatlantic Family Reunion Summit,” the venture’s

goal was building relationships and coming together to share stories and strategies for mission and ministry.

ECD president **Blasious M. Ruguri** characterized the summit as the “realization of a dream” deferred. He welcomed the North American delegation with a charge that included a confession that misinformation and misconceptions had kept the groups apart.

“We must do the hard work of destroying the strongholds that still enslave so many millions of those that we serve,” Ruguri said. He then challenged the gathering to remain faithful to the vision and committed to the mission as well as to serve “in a manner worthy of the sacrifice of our ancestors, and especially of our Savior.”

The summit included sessions to examine missional

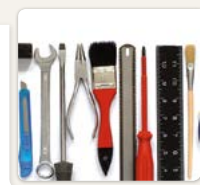
growth, including an emphasis on the concept of Total Member Involvement (TMI), an initiative of the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference to get every church member involved in sharing Jesus with their neighbors and friends. African leaders were eager to share how God is blessing the work in Africa, where approximately nine million Seventh-day Adventists currently live.

WAD president **Elie Weick-Dido** delivered a closing charge that called on the groups to embrace their shared heritage and values as well as to pursue common goals and ventures. Each African division was matched with three regional conferences, whose administrators committed to inviting and hosting the African church leaders in the United States regularly. [R. Clifford Jones, *Lake Union Herald/Adventist Review*] ▼



Photo: Lake Union Conference News

Garry Phillips, MBA, is a retired member of the Bethany Evangelical Church who resides in Paisley, Renfrewshire, Scotland.



# Expository preaching

“Expository preaching is the exegesis and ‘exposing’ of universal Biblical truth to every age, every audience.”<sup>1</sup> It explains what the Bible means by what it says. Exegesis is a technical and grammatical exposition, a careful drawing out of the exact meaning of a passage in its original context.

Further, we can say that expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical,

*They honored the Word of God because the Holy God used it as a means to communicate with His people.*

and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit applies, first, to the preacher’s personality and experiences and, then, through the preacher, to the hearers. It involves a series of components.

The first book on homiletics to be produced by the English Reformation was *The Arte of Prophecyng*, written by William Perkins (1558-1602), which shows that this has been an important subject for centuries.<sup>2</sup>

The master of expository preaching for many, and certainly for myself, was Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, who, prior to his death, had been the minister of Westminster Chapel, London, England, for some 36 years. Lloyd-Jones is a classic example of an expository preacher. Let us put together a profile of a positive preacher from his ministry.

From the beginning, he sought to give a verse-by-verse understanding of the Word of God to God’s people. By so doing, he dealt with all aspects of the passage. There was no hiding place for the difficult verses. J. I. Packer best sums up the impact that Lloyd-Jones had on so many. “He said that he had ‘never heard such preaching.’ It came to him ‘with the force of electric shock, bringing to at least one of his listeners more of a sense of God than any other man.’”<sup>3</sup>

Albert Mohler, a great preacher in his own right, states, “When it is done rightly and faithfully, authentic expository preaching will be marked by three distinct characteristics: authority, reverence, and centrality. Expository preaching is authoritative. Moreover, it stands upon the very authority of the Bible as the Word of God. It requires and reinforces a sense of reverent expectation on the part of God’s people. And finally, expository preaching demands the central place in Christian worship and is respected as the event through which the living God speaks to His people.”<sup>4</sup>

Preaching is central to worship. The Puritans built their places of worship (meeting houses) with an “elaborately-carved raised

pulpit over which hung a sounding board. To reach the pulpit, the minister had to climb a flight of narrow stairs. The pulpit Bible would sit on a cushion of green velvet with long tassels hanging from its corners.”<sup>5</sup>

It was a testimony to their reverence for the Word of God and highlighted the importance of God’s Word. They honored the Word of God because the Holy God used it as a means to communicate with His people. Lloyd-Jones believed that preaching was the “logical demonstration of the truth of a given passage of Scripture with the aid, or unction, of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup>

I wish preaching would enjoy the position in the church it once did. Often, it is relegated to just another part of the meeting. In many places, just like the announcements, it has become secondary to everything else. Other preferences are placed before it, filling up the time with other than the Word of God. What some people overlook is that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (Rom. 10:17, NKJV). ❏

- 1 Michael A. Milton, “What Is Expository Preaching? 8 Important Things to Know.” <https://www.crosswalk.com/church/pastors-or-leadership/what-is-expository-preaching.html>
- 2 A reprint of this book is available: *The Art of Prophecyng With The Calling of the Ministry* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1996).
- 3 John Piper, *When I Don’t Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 77.
- 4 R. Albert Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2008), 69, 70.
- 5 Amy Belding Brown, “The Puritan Meetinghouse,” *Collisions: Natives and Puritans in Early New England* (blog), April 18, 2014, [amybeldingbrown.wordpress.com/2014/04/18/the-puritan-meetinghouse/](http://amybeldingbrown.wordpress.com/2014/04/18/the-puritan-meetinghouse/).
- 6 Wikipedia, s.v. “Martyn Lloyd-Jones,” last modified June 6, 2019, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martyn\\_Lloyd-Jones](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martyn_Lloyd-Jones).

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