

Evangelical Forum Newsletter



Vol. 1. No. 1
December 2003

Purpose: The Evangelical Forum is a network of concerned evangelical Pastors and laymen who serve in churches that are part of the Baptist General Association of Virginia (BGAV). We are supportive of friendly cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention and affirm the Baptist Faith and Message of 2000.

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On the Forum's Purpose

The purpose of the Forum is printed above. At our November gathering several concerned laymen asked if we would be doing any political strategizing about creating change in the BGAV. The answer from those who have served in steering the Forum has been "no." As we see it, the BGAV will be nearly impossible to change by political means. We have committed ourselves, rather, to pray and worship and seek a movement of God to restore, renew and revive this dying denomination.

When we met in 2002 in Virginia Beach we were asked, "Why are you still in the BGAV? Why

don't you leave and join the SBCV?" The only answer we can give is that we feel led of God to remain in the BGAV as an unapologetic evangelical presence.

This does not mean that concerned Pastors and laymen might not be led to take "political" action in doing things like telling the truth in their churches, speaking from the floor at BGAV meetings, or leading their churches into appropriate stewardship (like, if not already there, moving into the WM1 track or, better yet, designing your own track which gives a more reasonable percentage to SBC mission agencies and seminaries). It remains our belief that if most committed BGAV church members understood the real issues in BGAV life they would be appalled at where we are heading.

Despite over 20 years of anti-SBC rhetoric in the BGAV and the *Religious Herald*, and much to the chagrin of moderate leaders, the SBC is still the primary recipient of BGAV mission dollars. 332 churches gave through the pro-SBC WM1 in 2003 (23% of BGAV churches), while only 91 (6% of BGAV churches) gave through the pro-CBF WM3. Virginia Baptists gave nearly 3 million dollars to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering and 1.3 million dollars to the Annie Armstrong Offering to support SBC mission efforts. Despite all the CBF promotion in places like the *Religious Herald*, only around \$400,000 was given to the CBF Global Missions Offering. The totals show that the BGAV churches are still largely SBC supporting in spite of the mass exodus of conservative SBCV churches. Perhaps one day the sleeping giant will be awakened.

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2003 Evangelical Forum Roundup

The second annual Evangelical Forum was held on Wednesday, November 12, 2003 at the All Saints Reformed Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Virginia. There were about 30 Pastors and Laymen present representing 12 BGAV churches from across the state.

The theme of the meeting was "Called to Preach the Bible," taking 2 Timothy 4:2 as the theme scripture passage. In the afternoon session Rob Stovall, Pastor of Holland Baptist Church in Suffolk, preached on "Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth." In an exposition of 2 Timothy 2:1-19, Stovall argued for the necessity of suffering in ministry. Also preaching in the afternoon session was featured speaker, Dr. Russell Moore. Moore is an instructor in Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. In addition, he serves as the Executive Director of the Carl F. H. Henry Institute. Moore's afternoon message was entitled "Called to Preach the Bible in this Culture" and was taken from the account of the death of John the Baptist in Matthew 14:1-12. Moore drew parallels between the unpopular preaching of John the Baptist and the task of contemporary proclaimers of the truth in the face of worldly opposition.

In the evening session, Moore took as his topic, "Called to Preach the Bible to Postmoderns." Opening with an account of the aging Johnny Cash's chilling appearance among the young, glitzy and glamorous at a recent MTV awards ceremony, Moore drew parallels with the preacher's task of declaring the stark realities of life and death in this generation. Rejecting current "church growth" efforts to alter the gospel to reach this postmodern generation, Moore called preachers to the basic task of proclaiming "the mystery of Christ" (Ephesians 3:3).

Also in the evening session, participants heard from two Virginia Pastors. John Hamric of Fishersville took as his message topic, "Confessions of a Recovering Moderate." Hamric, a native of Lexington, Virginia, recounted his own spiritual journey through a moderate seminary and his embrace of orthodox theology. He stressed that we must distinguish between "the God who is" and "the God we prefer." Finally, Vander Warner, former Pastor of Grove Avenue Baptist Church and Pastor Emeritus of Beaverdam Baptist Church, encouraged the Pastors by sharing about "Ministry for the Long Haul." Warner eloquently stressed the importance of longevity in Pastoral ministry. He also stressed the need for consistent, expositional preaching and teaching.

Several participants in the Evangelical Forum who also attended to the BGAV meeting, noted the sharp contrast in the tone and focus of the two gatherings. In just four hours of meeting, Evangelical Forum participants were able to hear five inspiring, Biblical messages. In contrast, in two days of meetings, the BGAV meeting included just one sermon of about 20 minutes. In fact, messenger changed the BGAV constitution so that in meetings beyond 2004, there is no necessity for even one annual sermon (see BGAV review article).

The 2004 BGAV meeting will be held November 9-10, 2003 (Tuesday-Wednesday) at the Roanoke Civic Center. We will tentatively plan to hold the third annual Evangelical Forum on Monday, November 8th. Mark you calendar now and plan to attend.

2003 BGAV Meeting Review

The 180th annual meeting of the BGAV was held Thursday-Friday, November 13-14, 2003 in Richmond, Virginia. Below are some first-hand observations of the meeting.

Empty Spaces

First, there were not a lot of people there. The clerk reported around 1,300 messengers. This number seems artificially high, given the fact that at most times there seemed never to be more than a few hundred people in the general session. Attendance peaked at the Friday morning session's debate on budget. The vending area also seemed particularly vacant. The messengers were swallowed up in the cavernous convention center that was only partially set up. The majority were over the age of 60. In comparison, the SBCV meeting, held earlier the same week, reported around 1,000 messengers. It has only been in existence since 1997.

Shrinking Budget

Second, most of the meeting centered on concerns related to money. The basic problem is that the BGAV budget is getting smaller every year and there are more and more "partners" who want to get a slice of the ever dwindling pie.

Moderate intra-murals

Third, a major breach was evident among the moderates. The prime struggle was over funding for the new Leland Seminary. The Budget committee's proposal that Leland receive increased funding in the Virginia portion of the budget was not primarily opposed by messengers from WM1 churches who should have been outraged that their churches were being asked to fund a non-SBC seminary. Its prime opposition came from fellow moderates who support liberal BTSR. Led by former CBF Executive Director Cecil Sherman and Jim Slatton, the retired Pastor of Richmond's River Road Church, Baptist (!), motions were made from the floor to amend the budget to either decrease or escrow funds for Leland. Much to the chagrin of these moderate mainstays, their efforts were decisively rebuffed by the body. Are some moderates in Virginia beginning to become uneasy with the blatant liberalism of BTSR? One should not hold out too much hope that Leland will offer a truly evangelical theological education. Some have described Leland as the theological equivalent of BTSR North. It seems more likely that what is at work is regional competition between moderates in Northern Virginia (supporting Leland) and those in Central Virginia (supporting BTSR). BGAV messengers, largely elderly laity, tend to support motions made from recognized committees. The fact that the Budget committee made this recommendation sealed its approval even in spite of the objections of notables like Sherman and Slatton.

Don't know much about history

Fourth, though Virginia Baptists have given frequent lip service to promotion of their version of Virginia Baptist history and heritage, when it came down to money issues, it was clear that promotion of the recently created Center for Baptist Heritage & Studies is not a priority for those in leadership. Its budget allocation was greatly reduced to make room for funding Leland. Again, this is related to the problem of multiplying "partners" and decreasing resources to fund those partners.

Dodging the Averett issue

Fifth, the BGAV leadership turned to a well worn page from the moderate playbook by trying to pre-emptively “deal” with the controversy over Averett University. Again turning aside amendments and objection, the body followed the Budget committee recommendation to escrow funds for Averett in response to recent charges related to theological liberalism at the school. These charges originated from the recent visit to the school by ultra-liberal Episcopal Bishop, John Shelby Spong and a pro-homosexual article that appeared in the *Danville Register & Bee* written by Averett Religion professor John Laughlin. What was not clearly stated to messengers were the reasons for this decision. John Hamric rightly pointed out from the floor that if the BGAV was truly concerned about accountability in its partnership the move was justified, but if it was merely interested in ameliorating conservative churches, then its actions were hypocritical. Look for more double-speak to come in the future on this issue, including written “partnership agreements” that fail to address real issues. Look also for future recommendations of indirect funding for Averett through “student ministry” or “scholarships,” much like the indirect funding that the University of Richmond received when the Center for Baptist Heritage & Studies was approved. But Averett should also be able to read the handwriting on the wall. Funding will decrease not because of outrage at its liberal drift, but because there is less and less money to go around.

Preaching out; entertainment in

Sixth, preaching is no longer valued as the center of the worship experience by those who plan the annual program of the BGAV. In two days of meetings there was just one traditional sermon. In addition, very little time was devoted in the meeting to public prayer and the public reading of scripture. The thematic speaker for the meeting was a comedian, Dennis Swanberg. His morning session on Thursday was called “worship” in the program and was later referred to as such by John Upton. However, it was really about an hour of stand-up comedy. The evening session was also given over to Mr. Swanberg for another hour of “side-splitting comedy” and “soul-building message.” I did not attend the evening session, but one messenger I spoke to who did attend described it as an hour-long commercial for Swanberg’s CDs and video tapes. The abandonment of the centrality of preaching in favor of entertainment was, perhaps, the most pathetic and truly disturbing part of the annual meeting. In fact, much of Mr. Swanberg’s “comedy routine” was devoted to the mockery and trivialization of spiritual matters, including the acts of preaching and giving testimony. One could not help but think of the words of Amos: " Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord GOD, "That I will send a famine on the land, Not a famine of bread, Nor a thirst for water, But of hearing the words of the LORD" (Amos 8:11 NKJV).

A fellow evangelical Pastor observed that we should not be surprised at the BGAV’s lack of comfort with preaching, since it comes as a natural outcome from their rejection of propositional truth. The messengers also approved the Program Committee’s suggestion that the long-time tradition of an annual sermon (the only reason, by the way, for the meeting’s lone sermon) be done away with. Instead, the new guideline reads that the program committee will insure “that worship is emphasized during each annual meeting of the General Association.” No doubt, the “worship” will not be of the traditional and orthodox variety.

In addition to comedy, drama was also a part of this year’s program. On Friday, a youth also did an “interpretive dance” to the secular tune “I hope you dance.” No dots were ever connected for the messengers to understand exactly why this “dance” was appropriate for the BGAV meeting rather than a high school talent show. I guess the program committee figured that, at least, it wasn’t a sermon!

Where are the Pastors?

Seventh, one of the overriding themes of the meeting was the present crisis of “emerging leadership.” It was reported that there are around 400 vacant staff positions in Virginia Baptist churches. Of those around 200 are pastor positions, and many of those have been vacant for two years or more.

These figures were heralded to justify increased spending for theological education for Leland. It became clear in the budget discussion, however, just how few real “full time students” are enrolled at Leland and BTSR combined. And a further question remains as to even how many of those want to dirty their hands in working with the lowly local church rather than working for peace and justice in social ministry. Moderates have a fundamental problem. They devalue the task of preaching and teaching, the prime calling of any Pastor, and devalue the role of the Pastor by stressing “empowering the laity,” then wonder at why so few moderates are being “called” into pastoral ministry where their task is to preach and lead. What, no doubt, brings them great fear and trepidation is the knowledge that SBC seminaries, like Southeastern in neighboring North Carolina, are overflowing with conservative young men who are heading to fill vacant Virginia pastorates.

Wrap-up

There is more that could be said about the meeting. Among other low-lights were John Upton’s beaming account of his meeting with a Catholic Cardinal while on a “mission trip” to Austria and approvingly reporting the Catholic leader’s question to him: “What will Jesus say when he returns and finds his followers divided?” Did Upton not realize what the Cardinal was saying? He was chiding the Baptist “separated brethren” for not remaining in the Catholic fold. What is sad to consider is that when our Baptist leader meets a Catholic leader on the mission field, the Catholic tries to convert the Baptist rather than the Baptist the Catholic. And this is reported as something profound?!? Why exactly have we been sending missionaries to Austria?

I might also mention the continuing effort to offer “cutting edge” break-out sessions rather than conventional large group business sessions. Supposedly this is to make the meeting more appealing to post-moderns. The “breakout session” I attended on Thursday afternoon was devoted to the 175th anniversary of the *Religious Herald*. About 15 elderly messengers chose to attend this session to support this historical milestone in the *Herald*’s history. We were treated to a video on the *Herald* and a presentation by Mike Clingenpeel on how he fairly balances stories from the denominational press so as to avoid bias in reporting.

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Five Strategies for Renewal

How can a Pastor be used of God to spark renewal and revival in a local church? Below are five strategies:

1. Practice Expository Preaching. Begin preaching through whole books of the Bible, chapter by chapter, and verse by verse. Start with shorter books till you get your bearings (like James or Ephesians). This is the most effective method for exposing the members of our churches to the teaching of the Bible. We cannot complain about lack of Biblical literacy if we are not willing to consistently open the Word of God and systematically preach through it. Our preaching should, however, be just that—preaching. Be careful of just doing a Bible study from the pulpit. Faithfully teach, encourage, and exhort through one book of the Bible and encourage the people to take heed to “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).
2. Encourage meaningful membership. Perhaps the greatest scandal in contemporary evangelical church life is the erosion of meaningful church membership. The basic problem is that the average church has hundreds on its membership roll and less than a hundred who faithfully attend services. One basic step to move toward a more meaningful understanding of membership would be to make this simple change in the church’s Constitution: “When a member fails to attend the Sunday services of the church for a period of three months, he or she shall be automatically removed from the membership of the church.” Yes, exceptions might be made for those who are truly hindered by providential circumstances (age, illness, etc.), but we should not be too loose with even these standards. The teaching of scripture is clear that we are not to forsake “the assembling of ourselves together” (Hebrews 10:25). There is no scriptural basis for “inactive church membership.” When we lower the expectations we get what we ask for!
3. Uphold and teach Biblical expectations for leadership. The church should carefully read and interpret the qualifications for church leadership, given in places like 1 Timothy 3:1-13. Communicate these expectations to your current leaders and to your congregation. Use them as a measuring stick to examine and evaluate in humility your own fitness for service.
4. Teach doctrine. The topical preaching in many pulpits caters to the felt needs of the listeners rather than God’s revealed truth. There ought to be some meaningful difference between the advice that Dr. Phil and Oprah provide on their talk shows and what the preacher says from the pulpit on Sunday morning. The people in the pews are super-saturated with entertainment and self-help. They don’t need another 20 minute infomercial on the Lord’s Day. To answer the real questions on the hearts of people today (things like, “Do Muslims go to hell when they die if they don’t know Jesus?” or “Is it OK for me to live with my boyfriend?”), Pastors must preach doctrine. As one country song puts it, “If you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything.” Of course, we should not teach our people just to stand for something, if by “something” we merely mean “moral absolutes,” for even some pagans believe in such things. We should teach them to stand for Biblical teaching (*didache* or doctrine) drawn from God’s Word.
5. Pursue Discipleship. Make a pledge not to baptize anyone if you have doubts that he is genuinely converted. When a person is baptized, be sure that a plan is in place for weekly discipleship and shepherding. Create a membership class and make it mandatory for joining the church. Spend time in one-on-one discipling of men in the church (if you are the Pastor). Get together with one man or a small group of men to read a book of the Bible and pray together. Encourage godly women in your church to do the same with the women. Guard your own integrity by delegating the discipleship of women to godly women.

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“Perplexing Church Problems”

This sermon by Rev. W. E. Abrams of Staunton Baptist Church in Staunton, Virginia appeared in the June 12, 1919 edition of the *Religious Herald*. The very fact that the *Herald* reprinted sermons of this sort in those days speaks volumes to the changes that have occurred in Virginia Baptist life since those times. All Virginia Baptist Pastors would profit from seeking out the archives of the *Religious Herald* for a corrective understanding of the real heritage of Virginia Baptists.

PERPLEXING CHURCH PROBLEMS

My message this morning is based upon three questions out of which will come a considerable number of other questions which I trust will at least be thought provoking, even if lacking in the inspirational element. The questions are as follows: Are there such things as perplexing church problems? Ought there to be such things? Is there any way of overcoming such things?

The first one of these questions will occupy the most of my time. The second one will be readily answered. And in the third one will be found the real key and heart of the message.

To begin with, then: Are there such things as perplexing church problems? Like the poor, they are with us always. Rather than attempt to enumerate the perplexing problems, I have reduced them to three groups, as follows: The problems of Right Living, or Consistency; the problems of Living Together, or Democracy; and the problems of Enlistment, or Efficiency.

Who should be members of a Baptist church? This is beginning with an easy question. You have been brought up on the answer. You can give it readily, without hesitation. Only those persons who have been regenerated. And who are these? Are they such as have once made a profession of faith, been immersed and then have united with the church, or are they such persons who in addition to having done these necessary things, are now living the regenerate life? And what is the regenerate life? It is nothing less than the life which is giving testimony to the power of Christ to save from sin; the life that gives evidence of at least persistent effort to overcome sin; the life that gives evidence of diligent use of the means of grace; the life that is neither selfish nor worldly.

The problems of Right Living have closely associated with them the problems of discipline. Should there be such a thing as church discipline? Which is better, to have a great church roll with hundreds of names of church members, good, bad and indifferent, here there and everywhere; or to have a very much smaller roll made up of such as at least try to live righteously? Is it better to keep certain names on the church roll because their removal might put out of harmony with the church certain ones who are very much more worth while; or is it better to purge the roll regardless of immediate consequences, bearing in mind all the time that which is right, and also the consequences which will be abiding when the noise and the smoke of the conflicts have disappeared? How far should the church permit her members to wander into sin or to neglect their obligations before bringing them to discipline? Is not the church guilty of injustice to her own when she permits members to go on their ways of sin or neglect without attempting to restrain them? When it is remembered that it is usually the weaker ones who fall by the wayside, and the stronger ones who stay in the running with the church, might not the weak and the erring and the neglected ones accuse the church and with justice, too, of being guilty of the greater sin in leaving them to themselves? What has become of the sacred covenant obligation to watch over one another

in brotherly love? After all, is not discipline at the proper time, in the early stages of sin or neglect, a real kindness?

I recall the story heard in Seminary days in the class in pastoral theology of a faithful son who preferred charges against his own father, a judge, a member of a Baptist church, who had been guilty of drunkenness; which father at the next covenant meeting of the church publicly acknowledged his sin, thanked his son for his action, renounced his sin and humbly asked for reinstatement in the church.

Just what is discipline? Is it always, necessarily, reprimand and trial and withdrawal of fellowship? Is there not also, and better, a discipline of mercy which by kindly visitation and reminder, and entreaty with remonstrance, might save from sorrow and misery and despair, and loss of usefulness? What are the functions of deacons? What became of the plan of organization into larger and smaller groups left with you some months ago? Are we satisfied to go on in ruts, with the burdens of work and responsibility borne by the same faithful few, or shall we arouse ourselves to the undeveloped possibilities of the many individuals who go to make up our church organization?

Next come the problems of Living Together, or Democracy in the Church. Why are we Baptists and not Methodists, or Presbyterians, or Episcopalians, or Roman Catholics? You can find church organizations under these names in our own community and nearly everywhere. We are Baptists because we have certain, definite, clearcut convictions and ideals for the maintenance and propagation of which we form a church group of our own. We have such church groups in our city, and they are to be found all over Virginia, and all over the Southland, and the nation and the world. Having such a church group, we determine our own plans and policies without outside interference. In the determining of plans and policies every member can have a voice and a vote. Decisions are reached by majority vote. Disagreement over plans and policies should end with the reaching of a decision. When we have the spirit of Christ, and are cultivating acquaintance with him, then it will be possible to live together in unity and peace; then we shall have participation in one another's lives; then we shall be brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. The finest tribute ever paid to the Christians of the early days was the exclamation, "How they love one another!" Nothing better could be said of us.

Next comes the problems of Enlistment, or Efficiency in the Church. For what purpose does our church exist? Is it to serve as a club for a few of our church members, or is it to serve humanity here and throughout the world? Is our organization efficient? What is the percentage of efficiency? If we should employ an efficiency expert and place in his hands the records of our various church organizations and activities, and let him be a quiet witness of our doings for a stated period, and report on his findings just as accurately and faithfully as he would report on some secular business enterprise, what percentage of efficiency would he give to us? Would we be ashamed of his report, or are we already callous enough not to care? Would it not be a helpful thing, if sometimes in our annual reports to ourselves, and to our District Associations, we would make mention of the many things which we did not do, instead of the few things which we did do?

How many lists might be made from our one church roll? There are those who attend the services of public worship on Sundays, and those who do not. Those who attend with a fair degree of regularity, and those who attend spasmodically. There are those who manifest some concern for the religious educational program of the church and those who do not. There are those who care something about the midweek prayer service of the church and those who do not. There are those who put Christian obligations in first place and those who can readily walk by the open doors of their church to attend some entertainment. There are those who give towards the support of the church and those who do not. Those who give in any proportion to their blessings and abilities, and those who give as little as they think they can get by with. There are those who are missionary, those who are omissionary and those who are antimissionary. Resident church members and non-resident church members, such are satisfied with long distance church membership and absent treatment. Our roll has

seventy-five names of persons scattered from Washington on the Pacific coast all the way to Georgia. And I judge there are almost as many who are now residents of our community who hold church membership in other Baptist churches, or perhaps in letters down in their trunks. What a vast difference exists between our church roll and the names which show up on our church treasurer's book. How many names show such irregular giving! How many gave for a few Sundays and then stopped giving! What surprises would greet the eye if the pages of the book should be opened to view. The church treasurer knows much about us. He knows just who are worth everything in the world, and just who are worth less; and he is conservative, too. He wonders to what use a good many put their church envelopes. He never sees them.

Ought there to be such things as perplexing church problems? We can find no consolation in the fact that every church has them; for no church ought to be content with them. Nor is there any consolation in the fact that from New Testament times the churches have been perplexed with problems; for there could be the aim and the effort to work at the solution of problems and to reduce them to the minimum. And the average problem, left to itself, does not take care of itself, nor eradicate itself. And if our problems are the same as they were several years ago, because we have made no effort to overcome them, then are we not guilty of the sin of neglect? It may be easier and more comfortable to follow the lines of least resistance, but such courses of conduct do not tend to the building up of Christian character either in ourselves or in others.

Is there any way of overcoming perplexing church problems? I have purposely withheld the announcement of my text until now. It is a part of the fifth verse of the eighth chapter of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, in which he says of the Macedonian Christians, "But first they gave their own selves to the Lord." Giving one's self to the Lord means nothing less than the laying of one's self daily upon the altar of sacrifice and service. And this is no light thing. On the contrary it is the hardest thing in the world to do. It cost blood. It costs a good bit more than most people are willing to pay. And yet there is no solution of our perplexing problems without the doing of this great, costly thing. When we are doing this then other things will be easy. Such giving of one's own self to the Lord will result in a gracious revival of religion in the individuals heart, which will spread to other and yet other hearts until we shall have made of our church a great character building, evangelizing, missionary institution. My association with you leads me to make the statement that some of you, yes, more and more of you, are doing this thing or are coming to the doing of it.

In the beautiful village of Chamonix ... in the high Alps Mountains, from which point travelers desiring to reach the lofty summit of Mt. Blanc, eleven miles in the distance, begin their ascent, there stands a monument in granite and bronze. Perhaps every tourist on arriving at Chamonix desires to have pointed out first of all from the high mountain peaks on every side, the snow capped summit of Mt. Blanc. On the block of granite stand two figures in bronze. One is the figure of deSaussure, the famous French student and geologist, looking eagerly, intently and with expectation, towards where the other figure, that of the celebrated mountaineer guide, Balmat, the man who first overcame all the obstacles of ice and snow and unsuspected dangers, and found the way to the lofty summit and reached the snow capped peak of the loftiest mountain in Europe, points the way. Through the days and through the years the figure points with accuracy towards that which so many anxiously long to see and to reach, the summit of the great white mountain. Thus will the life hid with Christ in God through the giving of one's own self to the Lord point with accuracy to that which is highest and noblest and best. The challenge is a superb and glorious one that calls for the best that is in souls willing to attempt the heroic. Will you meet the challenge?



Book Review

John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry*, Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 2002, 286 pp..

John Piper has written this book for Pastors. In it he urges Pastors to pursue a radical, Christ-exalting, life-transforming ministry centered on uncompromised fidelity to the supremacy of God. As the in-your-face title suggests, Piper calls for resistance against the modern “professionalizing” of ministry. One should not pursue ministry as a career path but as a passionate calling from God. Piper also notes, up front, that “there will be many rankled by the word *brothers*,” but he replies, “To all these I say, yes, you have a point. I receive it. If you believe that such things are the crying need of our age, then say them. But that is not my assessment of things” (xii).

The book consists of thirty brief meditations (each about 5-10 pages in length) on various aspects of Pastoral ministry. A Pastor might use the book for a month-long devotion, reading one chapter each morning as the day of pastoral ministry begins. I once heard Piper say that if you read one of his books then you have read them all. There is something quite true about that observation. One will find many of Piper’s favorite themes repeated in this volume. For example, in chapter 7 (“Brothers, Consider Christian Hedonism”), one finds Piper presenting his life thesis: “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him” (45; see Piper’s classic *Desiring God* for fuller exposition of his notion of “Christian Hedonism”).

There is also much in the book that is fresh and will prove nourishing food for the Pastor’s soul. Among other things, Piper praises the wisdom of reading Christian biography (chapter 13, “Brothers, Read Christian Biography), of believing in and preaching straightforwardly about hell (chapter 16, “Brothers, We Must Feel the Truth of Hell”), and of prophetically opposing abortion (chapter 27, “Brothers, Blow the Trumpet for the Unborn”). Piper also exhibits throughout a healthy skepticism of modern man-made methods. In chapter 8 (“Brothers, Let Us Pray), for example, he writes:

I do not become excited when denominations or churches react to their lack of growth by merely adding a new program. I know that the reason so few conversions are happening through my church is *not* because we lack a program or staff. It is because we do not love the lost and yearn for their salvation the way we should. And the reason we do not love them as we ought is because such love is a miracle that overcomes our selfish bent. It cannot be managed or maneuvered into existence. It is an astonishing miracle (56).

Indeed, one will not find in this volume any caudling of ministers by telling them they are overworked or warning them of burn-out. Nor will one find any suggestions for quick-fix church growth turn around. Instead, one will find an uncompromising challenge to pursue excellence and passion in pastoral ministry to the glory of God.

In the preface, Piper notes that “The beginning of the twenty-first century is a good time to be a pastor” (ix). Indeed, it is refreshing to read a book that so esteems the role of Pastor and encourages and challenges those of us who labor in the field of the local church to be faithful and prophetic shepherds.

-JR

“Biblical Church Growth”



By Pastor Rob Stovall

Reprinted from “The Link” the December 2003 newsletter of Holland Baptist Church in Suffolk, Virginia

“And he said, “So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; And should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, He knoweth not how. For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, Then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is brought forth, Immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come” (Mark 4:26-29, KJV).

Perhaps one of the hottest trends within Christendom is the church growth movement. Employing the latest in Madison Avenue marketing techniques and street-savvy opinion polling, local churches and whole denominations have endorsed the evangelistic philosophies of men like Bill Hybels (Willow Creek Community Church) and Rick Warren (Saddleback Community Church) in an attempt to attract and retain increasing numbers of people. Many are well intentioned. These men will assert that the church must do more to introduce herself in an appealing way to this present generation. As long as the gospel remains intact, it matters not how we package it. In fact, many would argue that our faithfulness to the gospel ministry requires that we employ any and all earthly means (short of sin) to gain a hearing for the gospel. The ends justify the means. This seems to be the basic, untested assumption of the present phase of the church growth movement. Is Scripture silent on this issue? Does the Bible endorse a “bread and circuses” approach to evangelism - an approach that is sadly man-centered and man-driven - or does Scripture speak of something more profound and lasting. To answer this we turn to Mark 4:26-29.

Mark 4:26-29 is a parable about growth. It is not concerned with proper farming practices that might promote said growth, because the efforts of the farmer are quite inconsequential here. In fact, the farmer of this parable does only three things: (1) he sows seed; (2) he gets plenty of sleep; (3) he harvests the fruit. This is the only involvement he has with the crop. It grows on its own, without his assistance. He interacts at only two points, (1) at the beginning when the seed is sown and (2) at the end when the harvest is brought in. During the interim, the seed germinates, grows, and produces fruit due to some inner principle of growth. It was not to fertilizer from the farmer’s hand that the growth was to be attributed. The seed sprung up independently, mysteriously, “he knoweth not how” (verse 27).

Jesus identifies Mark 4:26-29 as a parable of the kingdom. As such, it describes how God’s redemptive purposes are furthered. They are not furthered by external human means but by internal spiritual principles. This does not mean that God does not employ means; God has willed that His servants sow seeds of Gospel truth. He has not willed, however, that we add human invention, “fertilizer” so to speak, to that effort.

Simply put, as this parable pertains to the modern church growth movement, the ends do not justify the means. When it comes to kingdom growth, God does not need us to enhance the preaching of the gospel with consumer-driven elements. The gospel of God is entirely sufficient to accomplish that for which God intends it.