

## **PHILOSOPHY of MINISTRY**

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My resume identifies my ministry objective as follows: To serve as pastor of a Southern Baptist church, always pursuing one agenda: to model God's ways, preach God's Book, and love God's people, toward the end of influencing the members of the church I serve to love their Lord, to love His Word, to love His church, and to love the lost.

That is indeed my one agenda. Yet that fact should not be construed as meaning that I do not believe certain issues to be of paramount importance in ministry. Loving the Lord Jesus Christ requires obedience to His commands (John 14:21-24); therefore every church must wrestle with practically conforming itself to the pattern laid down for the churches once for all in the Bible. And every pastor ought to let people know what they can expect him to preach and how they can expect him to lead in light of those matters. Naturally, I will not expect any church to begin instantly living in perfect synch with what I believe the Bible teaches. Obviously, I cannot quite live that way myself. But I am growing in the direction of biblical living, and want every person in any church I pastor to know that I will consistently try to lead the church in that direction, as well. By God's grace, I will equally consistently recall that there is a profound difference between leading people and driving them.

There are many pressing biblical issues facing Southern Baptists today. However, I believe that most of the really important ones can be subsumed under one of four imperatives which ought to form and inform all that we are, do, and become: the Word, holiness, evangelism, and sovereignty. The four imperatives are all explicitly biblical. The issues they raise and address are not all so, though. Some of them are simply matters of how rightly to apply biblical teaching to church life at the turn of the third millennium.

### **The imperative of the Word**

We have done well as Southern Baptists to stake our claim as people of the Book, and to lash or institutions to the truth of the Bible's inerrancy. However, we still have far to go. Many of us say we believe the Bible, but tragically few of us can say with any confidence what it teaches. I have been shocked at how often we Baptists choose simply to retreat from an issue, rather than allow the Bible to overturn any of our dearly-held assumptions. Yet by the same token, I have been delighted to see the health, wholeness, and holiness which have resulted in my life and others' when we have humbly submitted to the Scriptures' teaching. The imperative of the Word means I must maintain a truth-driven life, a Word-centered ministry, an expository pulpit, an insistence on the sufficiency of Scripture, and an honest care with hard questions.

A truth-driven life. A life driven by truth has been my ideal since I was a child. Now, as an adult, I see clearly the toxic effects of our society's headlong rush into relativism. America is foundering in a sea of surmise and opinion because so few people believe that they can anchor themselves to any absolute truth. In this age of tolerance gone amok, one man's guess is as good as another man's whim; so who can say who or what is right any more? As it is in America, so it must not become in the church. I hope so to live as to challenge people to discover the truth and bring their lives into conformity with it. After all, it is God's truth that sets us free, and our own lies that keep us enslaved. And that is true whether our culture believes in truth or not.

A Word-centered ministry. For a believer in Jesus Christ, to disagree with the Word of His Lord is to be in open rebellion against God. As Baptists, we have broad and cherished freedoms to disagree with each other about the Bible. Yet as Christians, we have no right whatsoever to disagree with the Bible itself about anything. Consequently, I aim to see to it that my ministry remains unflaggingly Word-centered. I want to avoid giving my opinion as much as I can. As a man of God, I am called instead to give voice to God's opinion as communicated in His Word.

An expository pulpit. No preacher, regardless how gifted an orator he might be, has any authentic message from God unless He gets it by rightly interpreting and applying the written Word. Thus the bread and butter of my preaching will be the verse-by-verse, week-by-week exposition of extended passages of Scripture. Certainly there will be topical sermons, and series of sermons; yet even in these I will assiduously avoid taking texts from their contexts as pretexts for "pet peeve" preaching.

An insistence on the sufficiency of Scripture. God's Word claims (2 Timothy 3:16-17) to be breathed out by God, with the result that it is useful for knowing what is right, what is not right, how to get right, and how to stay right. It claims that it can equip one thoroughly for every good work. If what the Bible claims about itself is true, then it is completely sufficient for the cure of the human soul. I want so to minister as to help people experience that sufficiency for themselves, and be freed from the labyrinth of the world's psychotherapeutic speculations.

This desire cannot but affect my pastoral counseling. My conviction is that, since most psychologies (whether they call themselves Christian or not) ask the wrong questions about life, they inevitably lead people to wrong or irrelevant answers. They normally are concerned to discover how a person can be happy. Yet what the Bible cares about is how a person can be holy; it holds out the promise of happiness only to those who seek holiness. The meat of my counseling, then, will be helping people identify where their lives or thoughts are out of step with scriptural teaching. Furthermore, I will

never offer professional counsel to anyone, and will always try to give scriptural counsel to everyone.

On the other hand, there are psychological problems which are disorders of the body, not of the soul. While the cure of the soul requires only a rightly-understood Bible, a ruthless honesty, and genuine repentance, the cure of the body may require chemicals. And there are some people who, whatever their problem, are simply so unstable that they need to be hospitalized. Therefore I will refer persons to appropriate mental health professionals from time to time.

An honest care with hard questions. Throughout my childhood and youth, I asked lots of questions at church. The usual answer was, "You ask too many questions. Just have faith." That answer was and is wholly inadequate. When I am asked a question I cannot answer, I will not bluff and bluster and stonewall. I'll admit my ignorance and go do some homework. And I'll only appeal to faith and mystery when I've exhausted all possibility of rationally resolving a problem someone raises.

### **The imperative of holiness**

The Bible teaches, "Without holiness no man will see the Lord." (Hebrews 12:14) Yet too often among Southern Baptists, obedience to Christ is presented as a recommended option, rather than as a necessity to really being a Christian. This "optional personal holiness" notion is a dangerous error, bordering on outright heresy. Holiness is mandatory. By God's grace, I will keep my ministry focused on authentic regeneration, on repentant faith, on biblical discipleship, on scriptural family living, on classical Baptist covenantalism, and on gracious church discipline.

Authentic regeneration. The new birth is not something human beings do by walking an aisle or praying a prayer. In fact, there is no altar call or sinner's prayer in the Bible. Rather, there is a regeneration which is entirely the miraculous, mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, and without which no salvation is possible. (John 3:1-8) It is a conversion which actually converts, a new birth which by its very nature results in a new life. Throughout my ministry, I will trumpet this truth as the Scripture does: consistently, insistently, urgently, aggressively, lovingly, loudly.

Repentant faith. Nowhere in Scripture is anyone seeking salvation exhorted to "ask Jesus into his heart" or "pray to receive Jesus as Savior" or "accept Jesus as personal Savior." That wording is popular, and many have truly come to Christ in response to it, true enough. But that is simply testimony to the Holy Spirit's power to save sinners using even a very sloppy gospel message. The other side of the issue is sobering: many have been sealed contentedly in unrepentant unbelief by the use of that same wording.

According to the Bible and *The Baptist Faith and Message*, what it means to receive Jesus, to come to Him, is to repent and believe. As long as I have a voice, I will challenge the cute appeals that pass for gospel invitations in much of modern evangelicalism. The gospel command to us is that we turn from our sin to God, entrusting ourselves entirely to Jesus for time and eternity. The Bible teaches that only repentant faith saves anyone from sin; so will I.

Biblical discipleship. Discipleship is following Jesus, and it is not an addendum to saving faith. The decision to be saved by Christ's cross cannot be meaningfully distinguished from the choice to take up that cross and follow Him. Southern Baptists in particular need to realize that we have never been called to "help folks miss hell and gain heaven," exactly. What Jesus commissioned us to do was make disciples, baptize them into local churches, and teach them to believe and practice everything He commanded. That is why, by God's grace, I will speak with passion and persistence of discipleship as what it is: a journey into mystery, a constant stretching and growing, a fabulous adventure, a daily grind, the experience of eternity's life here in time, the proving ground of real assurance, and a necessity to final salvation.

Scriptural family living. The Bible gives a clear portrait of how a godly family functions. It also makes clear the inescapable link between the health of a church's families and the vitality of its witness to the lost. For this reason, I will endeavor by God's grace to head a genuinely holy home, and will exhort the members of the church I pastor to pursue the same ideal. I am in full, glad agreement with the 1998 article on family in *The Baptist Faith and Message*.

Included in this family emphasis will be a firm policy on weddings. Simply put, I will only perform a Christian wedding for a couple who are committed to building a Christian marriage. Specifically, I will rarely marry anyone without a four-month preparation process. I will marry divorced persons only if I believe they are ethically free to remarry by biblical standards. I will not perform Christian weddings in which unholy songs or vows are to be used. I will perform secular weddings only where no secular official is available for the task, and only when the couple are biblically free to marry. In all things I will seek to uphold the highest standards for the holiness of marriage and family.

Classical Baptist covenantalism. Church covenants are essential to the very meaning of Baptist church membership. According to *The Baptist Faith and Message*, what associates one member to the next is their common commitment to the covenant. That is, what makes someone a member of a Baptist church is not filling out a card, but freely covenanting with the rest of the church to try earnestly to live by a common rule. By God's grace I hope to grow a church in which there is a profound awareness among the members of their scriptural, covenantal obligations to one another. Members of such a church will enjoy a more biblical, more Baptist, more meaningful, more joyful, holier, healthier experience of church life.

Gracious church discipline. From the very beginning, the hallmarks of Baptist faith have been the sole, binding au-

thority of the Scriptures, and the regenerate church. The traditional safeguards to the regeneracy of the membership have been the separation of church and state, believer's baptism, the church covenant, and church discipline. By God's grace, and hopefully with evident graciousness, I will hold before church members their solemn responsibility and blessed privilege to admonish and receive admonishment from one another. Whether I will ever pastor a church in which firm, loving, consistent, redemptive church discipline is the rule rather than the exception, I don't know. I certainly won't ever try to force or manipulate a church into practicing discipline. Yet neither can I be silent on the biblical mandate that church members discipline themselves and each other for the purpose of godliness.

### **The imperative of evangelism**

Southern Baptists have a long tradition of commitment to evangelism and missions. I applaud that commitment, and share it. My heart beats to see people become true disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet for precisely that reason, I have profound concerns about the shallow, manipulative, program-oriented tactics of much modern "evangelism." I fear that, far more often than we'd like to admit, our outreach efforts have produced unconverted converts, inoculated against the gospel, twofold more children of hell than they were before.

Genuinely Christian evangelism relies on the holiness and the helpfulness and the humility of church members, and lays emphasis on effective methodologies only as a secondary consideration. No program that tries to spark numerical church growth, without first spurring church members on to greater spiritual growth, can be construed as Christian at all. For this reason I will continue to be wary (though hopefully not thoughtlessly dismissive) of much that comes out of the church growth movement. For the same reason, I also continue to be enthusiastic about the growth of ministry evangelism in popularity among Southern Baptists. Moreover, I am extremely encouraged by our Convention's renewed emphasis on the importance of the Sunday School for evangelism. Rightly done, the Sunday School can and should be a kind of "halfway house" between the world and the church.

### **The imperative of sovereignty**

God's sovereignty refers both to His unqualified right to expect complete obedience from everything in all creation, and ultimately to His invisible, ineffable, absolute control over everything in all creation. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords; He is the One who "works all things according to the counsel of His will." (Ephesians 1:11) If there is any attribute of God with which modern Christians need desperately to come to terms, it is His absolute sovereignty over all things. That, of course, is just to say that we need to face up to the simple truth that God is God, and we are not. The imperative of sovereignty has far-reaching implications for how we conceive God, how we value God, how we trust God, and how we worship God.

How we conceive God. By nature, we think thoughts about God which are, in A. W. Tozer's words, "so far beneath His dignity as to constitute something of a moral calamity." We think about God in terms that make sense to our natural minds, and so we dishonor Him grievously in our hearts. Because we are so jealous of our own status as free moral agents, and so zealous for our own supposed rational prowess, we are suspicious of God's sovereignty. We ask ourselves, "How can we make real choices if He is ultimately in absolute control?" We can't answer that question satisfactorily, so we concoct logical schemes and doctrinal systems which conceive of God as somehow just a little less than absolutely sovereign, especially in the matter of personal salvation. When we do, I believe we blaspheme Him by unwitting implication.

For my part, I am convinced that the old Particular Baptists, from whom our Southern Baptist stock descends, knew the God of the Bible rightly, and largely described Him and His salvation rightly in their catechisms and confessions of faith. They believed in the complete responsibility of man in all matters of life and faith; indeed, they would have abhorred any doctrine that denied it. As do I. Yet they also recognized the scriptural truth that God's secret, eternal plan is infallibly accomplished in all things, including man's responsible choice to receive or reject Christ. As do I.

So I aim to follow the example of the great Particular Baptists of the past, including the founders of our Convention, believing that that example was first set by Paul and Peter and John and James, and Jesus Himself. My ministry, by God's grace, will set before people both the grand, glorious, utterly sovereign grace of God in saving sinners in accordance with His own good pleasure, and the urgent, immediate, full responsibility of sinners to choose to turn from sin and entrust themselves to the Savior.

I despair of ever resolving the tension between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man; in fact, I'm quite sure it's irresolvable. Yet I will not abandon either truth. Both are essential to a well-informed, full-orbed understanding of scriptural teaching. Yet one of the two doctrines is more dangerous to limit: God's sovereignty. Nothing has more potential to destroy a human being or an entire culture than a stunted concept of God. Even an underdeveloped sense of responsibility is less perilous, since it will be corrected eventually if we think rightly of God. Embracing a wrong concept of God was what got us kicked out of Paradise to start with.

How we value God. Nothing argues half so eloquently that most of us have an impoverished concept of God as the

thoroughgoing worldliness of American Christians. We value our families and our plans and our jobs and our things as much as or more than we do God. One preacher complained, I think accurately, that we serve a wallet-sized god, one we can keep in our back pockets with our credit cards and other useful stuff. That, of course, makes us all idolaters, not significantly different from savages praying to stumps. Of course, as offensive as it is, that kind of talk is not quite unfamiliar. The Old Testament is full of it; so is the New. By God's grace, I will constantly implore people, myself first of all, to value the sovereign God supremely. To fail to do so is to forfeit true joy, and to court real disaster.

How we trust God. J. I. Packer says that the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty, held staunchly by our Pilgrim forefathers, gave them "steel in their bones and fire in their veins." I expect, by God's grace, to have a positive ministry, leading a confident church. If, as we sing, our God reigns, how can we justify being morose, negative, fearful, complaining people? Churches can and should trust God. Christians can and should trust God. To trust Him is to have life and health and peace; to doubt Him is rebellious, self-destructive folly. I plan to remind myself and others regularly.

How we worship God. There are strange winds blowing these days, muttering that we are supposed to make our worship services more attractive to the unchurched. In other words, we are to take a man dead in trespasses and sins, uninterested in church, uninterested in Scripture, uninterested in spiritual things, uninterested in God, and somehow get him interested in our worship services. A bracing awareness of the majesty of our sovereign God will rescue us from that needs-driven, audience-aware nonsense. The only real need any person has is to meet God and worship Him in the beauty of holiness. The only audience in any real worship service is He, the Sovereign, the Holy One of Israel. The worshipers are the performers; they are the ones who are being evaluated. By God's grace, I will consistently press for greater purity and higher joy in the church's worship.

These four imperatives embrace the beliefs and issues which God's Word and my own experiences have led me to see as the most important ones for my present and future ministry. As a reminder to myself of the more practical implications of these matters, I have prepared the following purpose statement. It is posted in my study as a signpost, continuously pointing to the right way for a godly pastor.

My purpose in life and ministry is to learn, live, love, and impart the truth of the Word of my Lord Jesus Christ. This will happen as I...

Discipline myself to learn, live, and love the Word of my Lord

- in study, in meditation, in prayer, in fasting, in obedience

Nurture my wife in learning, living, and loving the Word of my Lord

- by modeling a disciple's life in the Word as a godly husband
- by faithfully studying and praying through the Word with her
- by encouraging her to grow in her discipleship through courses of study, conferences, retreats, et cetera

Lead my children to learn, live, and love the Word of my Lord

- by modeling a disciple's life in the Word as a godly father
- by faithfully catechizing them in their younger years
- by faithfully discipling them in their later childhood and in their youth
- by encouraging them to grow in their discipleship through Sunday School, camps, retreats, et cetera

Help my church to learn, live, and love the Word of my Lord

- by modeling a disciple's life in the Word as a godly pastor
- by faithfully proclaiming the Word Lord's Day by Lord's Day
- by faithfully sharing the Word from house to house
- by responsibly overseeing the ministries of the church
- by encouraging them to grow in their discipleship through Sunday School, Discipleship Training, conferences, retreats, et cetera
- by setting the example in making new disciples

Touch my community to learn, live, and love the Word of my Lord

- by modeling a disciple's life in the Word as a godly man
- by opening my life and home to the lost
- by faithfully discharging at least one ongoing civic responsibility
- by standing staunchly and graciously for public righteousness

I trust these papers will help the reader have a clearer picture of who I am in ministry.