Spiritual Care Worker & Lay-Leadership Development Program

Module 12
Your Ministry 2

Module 12	Your Ministry 2		
Session 1	Preaching 1	Preaching 2	Preaching 3
Session 2	Praying for People	Celebrating God	Finding a Mentor

Please record your Study Hours

Date	*Time Started*	*Time Ended*	*Total Hours*

Name: _____

Address: _____

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Module 12
Session 1 – Lesson 1
Preaching 1

*Six Sermon Preparation Steps for Bi-vocational Pastors by **Ray Gilder***

1. Plant seeds in your mind
A preacher must develop a "garden" in his mind where sermons grow on a regular basis.

- **Quiet time** – ideas for sermons will surface.
- **Notes** – keep note cards in your pocket to jot down sermon thoughts as they arise throughout the day.
- **Reading** – read good books as often as possible. Ideas for sermons will usually accompany good reading material (write these on your note cards).

2. Pray for your people

As you think about the needs and concerns of different individuals in your church, sermon topics will surface.

3. Select the topics
It is vital to pray for God's leadership in your preaching. Sermon preparation should start as early in the week as possible (not Saturday night). The longer you wait the more the pressure builds. The sermon needs time to "cook."

- A sermon **series** will help you spend more time in sermon development.
- Preaching sermons about **special days** helps you relate to what is happening the in the life of the congregation.
- If a sermon from **another preacher** speaks to you, preach the same truth in your own style and in your own words.
- It is good to take an old sermon, **rework** it, and bring it up to date.

4. Develop the sermon

Watch out for the temptation to coast once you settle on a topic. With all the demands on the limited time of a bivocational preacher, it is easy to allow other things to consume your time after you have decided what to preach.

- As you develop the sermon, study the passage and its context to make sure you are being true to the text.
- After you have developed a basic outline, read your favorite commentaries to gain additional thoughts.
- One of the advantages of being bivocational is to be involved in the real world. **Everyday illustrations** will be easy for you to use. However, when using a current illustration, never embarrass someone or break a trust.

5. Prepare for delivery

- **Outline** – A good outline helps develop the flow of the sermon and keeps you on track. Without it, you may ramble, repeat yourself, and chase rabbits.
- **Application** – As you think about preaching a particular sermon, ask yourself, "How does this relate to the people in the pew? What are you asking them to do in response to the sermon?" Application is critical to effective preaching.
- Your **introduction** and **conclusion** are vital – carefully write out both. Your introduction can cause you to capture or lose your audience before you ever get to the meat of the sermon. Your conclusion should end the sermon and offer the right challenge to your audience.

6. Conserve your efforts

Sermon preparation is hard work. It consumes a large portion of a preacher's time. We are not good stewards if we do not conserve the efforts of our study and preparation.

- **Sermon notes** - Even if you do not manuscript your sermons, prepare a thorough outline with adequate notes so you can recall the heart of the sermon later. Your own sermon notes will be excellent study material for future sermons on the same text or subject.
- **Sermon log** - It is good to keep a log of when and where you preached each sermon. A sermon file is very helpful. You will want to cross-reference them under two headings: text and topic. I am convinced that preaching the Word of God is the greatest calling one can receive. It is not an easy task but it is most rewarding when you see God changing lives through the sermons you preach.

Topical, Textual or Expository Sermons – What is the best method?

Often, a session discusses whether preacher should preach topically, by text or if it should be expository. What form of preaching is best, let's look at the options:

Topical Sermons: A topical message is a sermon where a preacher uses passages to support a thesis about a particular topic. (eg. How to be a Godly Husband) At a Purpose Driven Church Planting Conference, one of the presenters said the very act of **preaching expository sermons is a contradiction to the Bible**. To preach expository sermons was 'un-Biblical' in the sense that the books were written to deal with specific issues & topics. This is the model that a preacher should preach today. Paul & Peter wrote topically and used 'texts' to support their points.

Textual Sermons: A text message is one where a singular passage of the Bible is used as a jumping point to discuss a particular thesis. (eg. 1 Corinthians 13 to discuss Love is an Action)

Expository Sermons: An expository sermon is following a book of the Bible, passage-by-passage to allow the text to determine the point. (eg. Galatians 1:1-4) Most conservative churches would argue that expository preaching is the only way to preach. Reformed churches stress l*ectio continua* (preaching through whole books of the Bible in course). Timothy Keller

summarizes the sentiment as he writes why conservative churches feel non-expository preaching is theologically inferior; "1) First, other forms of preaching are considered 'man-pleasing' because we are choosing texts we prefer rather than preaching through the 'whole counsel of God' as God provides it in the Bible. 2) Second, other forms of preaching are more open to abuse since your thesis is not being controlled directly by the text. 3) Thirdly, other forms of preaching do not show as much honor to the text of Scripture. The expositor focuses on the Biblical passage itself in a way that the others do not."

Module 12
Session 1 – Lesson
Preaching 12

What Is a Topical Sermon?

A sermon is a message delivered by a member of the clergy to a congregation of believers. The three most common sermons are textual, expository or topical. Textual sermons use a passage of Scripture as the basis of the message jumping-off point. Expository sermons follow a book of the Bible in order, and each chapter determines the thesis for the sermon. Topical sermons cover a single topic. Many contemporary pastors prefer using a topical sermon to teach.

Definition

- Topical sermons are based on a single subject, like "How to love your neighbor" and the thesis of the sermon is derived from the subject and supported by scripture. A preacher chooses a thesis and selects scripture to support it, much like a research paper. Topical sermons give the preacher flexibility in his teaching. There might be an epidemic of gossiping in a church, so the pastor chooses to preach on the sin of gossip, using Bible scripture as proof that gossiping is harmful.

Positives

- Topical sermons can allow a preacher to cover a Biblical subject completely. Many preachers use topical sermons in a series format so they can cover the topic over many weeks or months. Most of the favorite television preachers teach using the topical method, so it has become an easily recognizable and comfortable format to learn the Bible. Many of the largest churches in the U.S. use topical sermons to educate their congregations on subject matters that apply directly to them.

Negatives

- Many from the traditional clergy do not like topical preaching. They feel that topical sermons give too much leeway for a preacher to manipulate scripture to fit a message that stems from his own prejudices or preferences rather than preaching by the leading of God. Even if a pastor sticks closely to the Bible, there are only so many topics he can cover, so this method can be limiting over the long term.

Kinds of Topics

- The Bible addresses nearly every possible situation a person can go through, from poverty to wealth or love to hate, the Bible has scripture that deals with each subject. The scriptures also reveal God's purpose for man and woman. A preacher who takes inspiration from scripture can construct a sermon that appeals to and affects everyone who hears the sermon. Sermon topics can vary from relationship issues, like "How to be

a good spouse" to deeper spiritual topics like "Leading an abundant life." If a preacher is in tune with his congregation and the leading of God, he will find the right topic to reach the hearts and minds of his congregation.

How to Write a Sermon

Anyone can write a sermon today. You don´t need to be a Bible expert. If you can follow instructions and have access to the Internet, sermon preparation can be as easy as one, two, three. Simply follow the step-by-step instructions on sermon preparation below.

- Choose a biblical topic for the sermon. Keep your audience in mind. Select a topic that inspires you. You can´t inspire others if you're not inspired first.
- Prepare an outline for the sermon based on your topic.
- Visit the Bible on the Web website. (See Resources.) You don´t need to register. Review all sections.
- Perform searches either by keywords or biblical scriptures, then press the appropriate button.
- Write your sermon once you have found the biblical passages that back-up or reinforce your sermon topic. Be authoritative in tone.
- Use real life experiences and examples to back-up biblical passages. Be as brief as possible.
- Review your sermon several times before doing it in public. Sermon preparation is not difficult and can be very rewarding. The more sermons you write, the more you want to do.

The Textual Sermon Is a Miniature Expository Sermon

The Textual Sermon is a miniature Expository Sermon covering a few verses, a verse, or part of a verse, but not the whole paragraph.

Just to review, Broadus in his book, "Preparation and Delivery of Sermons," says that topical sermons are those in which the subject alone is derived from the text.

Textual sermons are those in which the subject and main divisions are derived from the text.

Expository sermons are those in which the subject, main divisions and most of the details are derived from the text.

That explanation of the three major types of sermons might be a little bit simplistic, but it comes close to the truth. The fact is, many writers believe that the topical and textual sermons can and should be just a variation of the expository sermon.

Even though the textual sermon covers fewer verses than the expository sermon, the subject does come from the Bible and each major point comes from those verses. Yes, there is less material from which to get the supporting material, but it still may be possible.

The textual sermon is just a shorter form of the expository sermon and covers only a few verses, a verse or part of a verse, but still expounds that shorter portion of Scripture.

What is this type of sermon?

Gibbs in his book, The Preacher and His Preaching," says that the textual sermon, as its name implies, consists of selecting verses, a verse, or even the part of a verse as the text.

After the theme or subject of the verse or verses has been discovered and stated in one's own words, it should be analyzed, divided, and expounded in the light of its context. As someone once said, "A text without a context is just a pretext."

The textual sermon is similar to the expository type of sermon, except that instead of selecting a paragraph, with many verses, the preacher has only a few verses or one verse or a part of a verse from which to speak, and must confine himself to expounding this portion of Scripture to his hearers.

This is thought by many to be a more desirable form of preparation than the topical method. An important fact to keep in mind is that the chief difference in textual sermon and topical sermons is the source of the divisions.

Particular emphasis is placed on that fact. In the case of the subject or topical method, it has been seen that once the subject has been determined, the minister then adds the subtopics according to his own reasoning.

There is no such list of subtopics with the textual sermon method. The question naturally follows, "What is the source of the divisions in a textual sermon?" The answer is that the Bible supplies them from the text chosen. It can be readily determined that this will offer more scriptural outlines.

The dictionary (Word Web-Princeton University) says that "textual" is "Of or relating to or based on a text" and of course the "sermon" is "an address of a religious nature (usually delivered during a church service)." So the textual sermon is a sermon that is based on a Scriptural text.

What is Positive about this type of sermon?

Naturally, the textual sermon centers around the text. This is the very first thing to be chosen. Not all verses lend themselves to this sort of sermon building. The preacher must study to find those which do lend themselves to this method of sermonizing.

This is a great way to bring the actual words of the Bible before the hearers, and it gives Divine authority to the message, as well. And since it is a short text, as opposed to a longer paragraph, it will be easier to remember or even memorized for that matter.

Breed, in his "Preparing to Preach" said that the textual sermon method is closely allied to the expository and the line of demarcation can not be sharply drawn. In the expository sermon more attention is generally given to special words or expressions, with more particular and extended explanation.

This, of course, is true because in the longer expository sermon passage, there are more words and expressions to expound.

The disadvantages of these methods (expository and textual) is apparent; they do not afford the range of the topical method. But they have this great advantage in that the preacher who employs them deals with distinctively Scriptural themes that come right out of the text.

And Broadus in his "Preparation and Delivery of Sermons," says that a well-constructed textual sermon has most of the advantages of the topical sermon, and the great additional advantage that is is much more intimately in contact with the text, drawing from it not only the subject treated but all the leading thoughts of the treatment.

It also gives ample opportunity for variety, freshness, and originality.

What is Negative about this type of sermon?

Some have said that the use of the text, especially of the short text, is often fatal to the most intelligent treatment of the Scripture itself. The Bible is chopped into fragments and sadly abused by the dislocation of its parts.

Its real meaning and intent cannot be discovered, so it is said, by taking a few isolated words from some book, and using them in whatever way the preacher may himself desire.

Because of this, the unity of the Bible is not so apparent with this method, as it is with the expository method of preaching. If texts are selected here and there throughout the Scriptures, they are not likely to impress the hearer with the unity of the Bible as a whole.

The Bible may be made to appear as a book of isolated texts, instead of appearing as it should...a living whole and a complete revelation.

Another danger is that the preacher may become nothing more than a text hunter in the Bible jungle of texts. Texts are never acquired by a homiletical search warrant. Passages of Scripture may be easily found, but texts that are texts indeed are not found by simply hunting for them.

To treat the Bible as a mere collection of texts is foolish and wrong; it yields no worthy fruits. It has a bad effect on the preacher and the hearer.

G. Campbell Morgan said, "There are thousands of people who have been brought up in somewhat close relationship to the Christian church who nevertheless think only of the Bible as a book of texts from which sermons are preached, or which are quoted in proof of some theological position."

Morgan goes on to say, "To think out a sermon which seems religious and then to hunt for some Biblical text upon which to hang it, is little short of profane." Dr. M. B. Riddle says, "The most pernicious habit is that of studying passages of Scripture mainly, if not exclusively, for homiletical purposes.

To treat the Word of God as a collection of texts for sermons is putting dishonor upon it. To use it as if this were its character is to get away from its full and true meaning. He who seeks to find in it little save sermon material will soon find himself short of good sermon material. What he thinks he finds will prove to be inadequate, and very often incorrect."

The danger comes when the preacher yields to the temptation to read the Word of God only that he may apply it to others. He avoids it by reading it first of all for his own soul's sake.

The preacher who seldom reads his Bible except for some sort of a homiletical purpose, may quite unconsciously excuse himself from his own private study upon the ground that he is professionally engaged with the Bible much of his time.

But such a preacher is not likely either to feed his own soul or to feed the souls of others. The texts upon which he preaches will not be chosen in the right spirit, nor handled in the most profitable manner. His work will be professional and hastily dutiful, but not warm, personal, practical, and spiritual.

What is Practical about this type of sermon?

If a preacher is to preach a textual sermon, he must first select one. How then does he select one properly? Texts my come to the preacher in the course of his general reading or of his pastoral duties, or in connection with special circumstances transpiring about him. But from whatever source they arise, they are given to him, and in that sense they are not of him.

As Watson said, "It is far better then for one to put himself in the way of texts finding him, than for him to attempt to find texts. In other words, it is not the man who selects the text. It is the text who selects the man.

As the minister was busy with study, or as he sat by the bed side of the sick, or as he walked the crowded street, the truth, clad in a text, suddenly appeared and claimed his acquaintance.

It seemed to him that they had met in the past, as one is haunted by the idea that he has known someone before he has ever seen him, and he will be right; for there is a pre-established harmony between that particular truth and his own soul."

Practically, however, the very best of all sources from which texts are acquired is the devotional reading of the Bible. Some texts come to the preacher indirectly when he is reading or listening to other preacher's sermons. Texts may also be acquired from providential circumstances when the circumstance is connected by God with some passage of Scripture in our mind.

Unger, in "Principles of Expository Preaching," says that although much textual preaching, like topical preaching, strays from the Bible, a bona fide use of this method will expound what the text or passage itself actually says, rather than what the preacher wants to draw from it to give expression to his own thoughts or ideas.

If the preacher truly expounds what the text actually means, he is of necessity, compelled not only to break it up into its leading words or clauses and use these as the main points of his message, but he must relate the text to its context in order to arrive at its accurate meaning.

And if the preacher does that he is really preaching an expository sermon, though of the textual sermon variety, and the only difference from a purely expository sermon will be the shorter length of the passage preached.

By the way, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892), pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, and who was called the "Prince of Preachers," was considered by most to be a textual type of sermonizer, and I might add...one of the best.

What is an Example of this type of sermon?

What God Requires

Deuteronomy 10:12-13

"And now Israel, what does the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord with all thy heart and with all thy soul. To keep his commandments, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good."

Introduction:
Explain who Israel was, and why God could require things of them to receive blessing; then explain who we are in Christ and why God can require things of us, though he does not force us to obey.

I. He Requires Fearing Him.

1. Fear means respect.
2. Romans 11:20. "And be not highminded, but fear the Lord."
3. Malachi 4:2. "To you that fear my name shall the Son of Righteousness arise with healing in his wings."
4. Explain further, and give illustration.

II. He Requires Walking in His Ways.

1. Walking, here, means the conduct of life.
2. 1 John 1:7. "If we walk in the light as he is in the light we have fellowship."
3. John 8:12. "I am the light of the world. He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness.
4. Phil. 3:17. Many walk so as to be an enemy of Christ.
5. Illustration: The Pharisees were the enemies of Christ. Stephen was a friend of Christ in his walk.

III. He Requires Loving Him.

1. 1 John 4:19. "We love him because he first loved us."
2. Eph. 6:24. "Grace be with them that love our Lord."
3. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy mind, and with all thy soul."

IV. He Requires Serving Him.

1. As often as Israel turned to idols, that often, God left them alone until they cried to Him.
2. Luke 16:13. "No man can serve two masters."
3. John 12:26. "If any man serve me, him will my Father honor." See also Rom.12:1.

V. He Requires Keeping His Commandments.

1. God was very jealous in this respect.

2. His commandments were laboriously given to Moses at Mt. Sinai.
3. Jesus says also to us, "Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I have commanded you." John 15:14.

Summary:
God is watching to see if we do these things.

Module 12
Session 1 – Lesson 3
Preaching 3

5 Surprising Reasons Expository Preaching Makes Sermon Prep Easy

Many pastors today go for shortcuts when it comes to preparing sermons. Such backstreets include swiping sermons from other preachers, visiting websites with prefabricated sermons, or purchasing Bibles with sermon outlines right in them.

These pastors don't realize their shortcuts lead to a dead end alley. With their back to an unexpected brick wall, these pastors will either hear "Your fired" from their elders, or "Poorly done, lame and lazy servant" from their Lord (depending on how long they last).

How shortcut preachers are (sort of) on the right track

Pastors who opt for shortcuts *are* halfway to the point where they need to be. They have recognized that they are *insufficient* for their task. But they have tried to solve their insufficiency in a self-sufficient way, namely, with shortcuts.

Once you realize that you are insufficient for preaching (and I hope you have), you need to turn to what *is* sufficient for the task of preaching: the Bible.

Expository preaching is easier because the *text* writes the sermon for you

At first glance, digging into the Bible in order to write a sermon from scratch might seem hard. The difficulty of the task is what sends so many preachers to the short cuts.

But when you determine that you will do your own work in the text, you will quickly see that the Bible does all the heavy lifting for you.

The expository preacher doesn't write his sermon. He *discovers* it.

This is because the text supplies everything you need. And *that* is because the Bible is (surprise!) *all sufficient*.

This is the heart of expository preaching. The Bible *itself* provides everything you need to help your people trust and obey Jesus.

5 reasons expository preaching makes sermon prep easy

How exactly does the expository preacher "discover" his sermon? He studies the passage expecting it to provide him with these basic sermon building blocks.

1. The text supplies the issue for your sermon to address. This is the Fallen Condition Focus (or FCF for short), which is just a technical term for "our sin problem." If you try to come up with this on your own, you'll be subject to your own whims, the whims of your congregation, or the whims of current events.

Addressing the issues raised in the text provides balance, and, over the long haul, will speak to every issue we face in life. This leaves you innocent of using the pulpit as a platform for your own agenda.

2. The text supplies your sermon outline. Bryan Chapell has provided a helpful distinction between the outlines of topical, textual, and expository sermons:

A topical sermon gets its theme or topic from the text, but it is developed elsewhere or according to the nature of the topic.

A textual sermon would get its topic plus its main ideas, its main points from the text, but the development of those points is also outside the text itself.

An expository sermon gets its main idea, its main points, and its subpoints or its developmental components *from the text as well*. So it is by methodology binding the preacher to say what the text is saying. The preacher becomes a bondservant of the text, working according to the thought of the original author.

3. The text supplies your theology lesson. When we preach, one of our goals should be to locate our passage within the narrative of the Bible and within a theological framework. Each passage contains a word or phrase that points to a broader topic in biblical or systematic theology. If you take your cues from the text, any excursus you take will be relevant to your passage and your sermon.

4. The text supplies your gospel presentation. Let the text prompt you regarding what angle you take on the gospel. This way you will preach it with detail and nuance, since each passage provides a unique contribution to the gospel message.

5. The text supplies you with illustrations. Recently I was looking at James 1:16-27, the famous "be doers of the word" passage. I was struck by how many ready-made sermon illustrations

were deposited in that passage. These illustrations come from astronomy ("lights…no variation or shadow due to change," 1:17), childbirth ("brought forth," 1:18), agriculture ("firstfruits," 1:18), agriculture again ("implanted," 1:20), cosmetology (the word as a mirror, 1:23-24), husbandry ("bridled," 1:26), and clothing ("unstained," 1:27).

With every passage packed full of so much rich sermon goodness, isn't it shocking that pastors would ever want someone else to put sermons together for them?

Don't do expository preaching just because it makes your job easier

It's possible for you to use expository preaching in the same way other guys use downloadable sermons. Just to go for what is easiest. But expository preaching is still work. And only hard working pastors deserve to preach for a living (1 Tim. 5:17-18).

What makes expository preaching honorable is that God's word drives the content of the sermon, from beginning to end. The goal of the expositor is to simply be faithful to the word, and to let God's word do its work among God's people.

This glorifies God because it gives him all the credit for whatever good the sermon does. It glorifies God because it makes the preacher a servant of God, rather than making the sermon a servant of the preacher.

Making expository preaching relevant and interesting

Graeme Bradford

Preaching today is probably more difficult than during any other period in history. Today's preacher is under constant competition from mass media, television, and the Internet.

People who sit staring at the computer screen or the television for hours on end find it boring to listen to the preaching of the Word for a few minutes. Sermons acceptable 10 or 15 years ago fall flat on many modern audiences.

A recent survey on preaching revealed that one thing listeners want the most is that sermons be kept short, interesting, and relevant. Because of this there is the danger that preachers,

while seeking to be interesting and relevant, will abandon biblical preaching. The challenge for preachers, therefore, is to be able to preach the Word in such a way that people will find it interesting and relevant. Can expository preaching do the job? It should and will, if we understand what expository preaching is all about and if we actually preach expository sermons.

What it is not and what it is

Expository preaching is not reading Scripture to begin the sermon. Scripture is not a national anthem "sung" to start an event and then quickly forgotten. Expository preaching is not reading a passage and providing a running commentary verse by verse. Expository preaching is not allegorizing or spiritualizing a passage. It is not taking a passage like the parable of the good Samaritan, and claiming that the man who went down to Jericho represents Adam, the Levite is the law, and the Samaritan is Christ, etc. Though some of these claims may have some truth in them, the problem is that what is preached is not what was intended by the biblical writer.

True expository preaching is biblical preaching. It selects a passage of Scripture that is a natural thought unit. It finds out what the author is trying to say to the original listeners. It makes the main idea of the passage the main idea of the sermon, and the sub-ideas of the passage the sub-ideas of the sermon. It allows the preacher to blend his or her ideas into the mold set by the scriptural passage. It demands that the authority for preaching comes from the authority of the Word of God. It applies the message of the passage to current problems inhabiting the lives of people in the congregation.

In other words, expository preaching goes through three stages. It (1) discovers the actual intent of the biblical writer; (2) finds the timeless truth that is taught; and (3) applies that truth to the contemporary hearers in their cultural context.

Stage 1: Discover the original intent

To discover the original intent of a passage, it is good to begin with its natural setting. Modern translations provide paragraphs with a natural thought unit. Having chosen a passage, you may seek the help of a small group of three or four people from your congregation. Read the passage with them and ask how they perceive its message. The exercise will be a blessing to you as well as to the group. They will feel a sense of owner ship and identify themselves with your sermon, and you will benefit by their insights and ideas. Above all, they will help you to bring the passage to the actual life of the congregation.

As an illustration, consider Mark 4:35-41. Study the passage to be sure you understand it correctly. Read it in the translation you are going to preach from. Read it in different translations. Study it with a group of your helpers. Refer to commentaries to find the original context and intent. Outline the passage and state what the Bible writer is saying to the original readers.

Here is what I have come up with:

1. Jesus and His disciples are in a storm at sea. They find themselves in a life-threatening situation (verses 35-37).

2. The disciples respond with fear and despair (verse 38).

3. Jesus worked a miracle and demonstrated His power to help them in difficult situations (verses 39-41).

Stage 2: Find the timeless truth

The next step is to find out what timeless truth is being taught in this passage. Here is what I found:

1. God's people sometimes find themselves in difficult situations.

2. Our tendency is to respond with fear and despair.

3. But God has the power and authority to care for us and bring us through our most hopeless times. Having done this, we are going to tell the story as it really is in the Bible.

We are going to take the story's time less ideas and bring them over into the life of our congregation. To do this we must keep some questions in mind: Where does this timeless truth show up in real life? Do my people really believe this? If they don't, what will I have to explain in order to persuade them to accept it? How will I get them to see the connection between this passage and how they lead their lives?

People do not lie awake at night wondering whether it was possible to have a life-threatening episode on Lake Galilee or why Jesus was able to sleep through such a storm. Instead, they worry over why their children have not yet come home for the night; how they are going to make the next mortgage payment now that they have lost their job. They are worried about growing old and facing death. They are wondering how to make their way through the drought or flood that has wiped out their crops, or the report from the doctor telling they have cancer.

The expository preacher must relate the biblical passage to these needs in order to be relevant. Thus, the relevant preacher exegetes not only the Scripture but also the congregation in order to bring the biblical message home to where the people are. The question is Where does my congregation meet with the original audience to whom the passage was written? Have they experienced David's guilt? Have they been accosted by the doubts of Thomas? Have they denied their Lord as Peter did? Are they being tempted to fall away as Demas did? Have they ever been betrayed by a Judas?

People need to know that, despite their failings, they are still loved by God. They need the assurance that they have worth in God's sight because of Christ and that through His merits they can be forgiven and accepted and realize their full potential.

The road to a sermon's relevancy passes through people—their interests and their needs. When using illustrations, it is good to remember that few in a given audience will be or have been missionaries in Africa. So your story of the missionary in Africa may not come close to their lives at all. Nor is it likely that any of them will ever finish up in a lions' den as did Daniel. Nor is it likely that they will be sold to camel drivers, as was Joseph. Biblical stories only serve to help us learn timeless principles, which can then be brought into the full light of the contemporary human scene.

You may, for example, create a scene in which you say: "Here is a young woman who has just found out she has a lump on her breast. She awaits the diagnosis. Is God still with her? That's her concern. It weighs on her mind. She can't sleep at night. She wonders where God is in all this. Has He deserted her?"

A relevant biblical preacher is able to include people in such a manner that, at the end of the sermon, a variety of people will say that the sermon addressed issues that really mattered in life.

Stage 3: Applying the truth to your audience

The final stage of a relevant expository sermon is developing an approach that connects the story and the time less truths into the everyday lives of the listeners. A good outline will help in this. Begin the outline by stating your sermon idea in the most exact sentence you can find.

Here is how I would state the idea of Mark 4:35-41. "God's people often find themselves in difficult and discouraging situations; but God is able to help them." This sentence now becomes the dominating idea for the listeners to receive. Too many unrelated ideas and scattered comments mean that the listeners will leave with a basketful of fragments but not one single truth to challenge or affirm them in their every day life. Discover that single truth, and repeat it many times in different ways throughout the sermon.

Our next task is to address the question, How are we to structure the sermon so that its thrust consistently speaks to an audience or congregation? Sermons have two basic structures: deductive and inductive. In a deductive sermon we may introduce the main idea at the outset and then list the supporting points. Remember the approach is to explain an idea or prove a proposition. When the idea is introduced to start the sermon, the audience is likely to react with "*Is that true*?" or "*Why should I believe that*?" The stance of the preacher resembles that of a debater; the points in the sermon be come reasons or proofs of the essential idea or thought of the sermon. Here is a suggested outline:

Introduction

God is able to help us through the most difficult situations.

Body

1. Jesus and His disciples were in a boat on the sea when a storm hit them (Mark 4:35-37).

We also face storms in our lives. Some people find a storm comes to them when they...

2. The disciples panicked (verse 38).

Often we react as did the disciples when we face difficult situations. I re member once when I...

3. Jesus awoke and calmed the storm and rebuked them for failing to trust God (verses 39-41).

We also find it difficult to trust God in stormy situations. We have potent promises in the Bible that He will never forsake us. He will care for us in times of great need. Times when ...

4. He has not promised to always calm the storm as He did on this occasion. Often His care for us involves giving us strength to cope.

He promises strength to the mother when ...

To the young person when...

To the single person when ...

To the child at school when ...

Conclusion

Life is full of storms. They are normal, even in the lives of believers. When they come we must never lose heart, thinking that God has forsaken us, whatever the situation.

Let us now see how we would handle the passage inductively. The inductive approach is helpful when the audience is perceived as being hostile to the idea you want to present and to younger generations who often resist traditional, more deductive preaching. All of Christ's parables except one were inductive. This approach basically says to the listener: "Here's a problem. Let's explore God's Word together and see if we can find the answer." The inductive approach leads the listener through the thrill of discovery. Here is a suggested inductive outline:

Introduction

1. We often find ourselves in difficult situations. Example ...

2. We wonder, "Why has God allowed this to happen to me?"

3. Mark 4:35-41 tells us of a difficult situation.

Body

1. God sometimes allows people to come into difficult situations.

a. Jesus suggested they get in the boat (Mark 4:35).

b. When they did, they got into trouble (verses 36,37).

c. Examples of other people who got into trouble when they followed God faithfully ...

2. The situation was so serious that the disciples despaired thinking they might drown (verse 38).

a. Our response to trouble is despair, thinking we may perish. Examples and illustrations ...

b. But Jesus used this occasion to show them His power to deliver them (verses 39-41).

Examples of how God has used difficult situations to show His power in the lives of many people.

Conclusion

When we follow God we may find ourselves in difficult situations. However, He has promised never to forsake us. He may not work a spectacular miracle to help us. He may choose to give us strength to cope with the situation.

Making dry bones come alive

Outlines serve only as skeletons of thought. The preacher needs to make the dry bones come alive. The skeleton needs to be covered with flesh. That's what supporting ideas do. Of first importance among supporting ideas are illustrations. Good illustrations are vital if we are going to hold the attention of our audience.

Remember we are fighting a battle for attention. It is easy to put people to sleep. A preacher asked a lady sitting next to a person who had just gone to sleep, "Would you please wake him up?" The lady smiled and replied, "You wake him up yourself. You put him to sleep."

The media-saturated audiences of today want to watch the preacher instead of just listen, feel the message rather than just think about it, and remain passive rather than respond. Recognizing this, the best contemporary preachers are able to find imaginative illustrations to

help hold peoples' interest. Preachers who know how to illustrate are like the poets. They are great observers of life. They can see illustrations in the simple things that occur each day. Others will pass over these experiences without seeing the possibilities.

For instance, Phillip Yancy writes about looking at his fish tank: "I am as God to them. They rely on me to give them food and oxygen. I mean them no harm; yet when I go near the tank they get frightened. How can I communicate to them and let them know that they need not be afraid of me? I guess the only way would be if I were to become one of them."[1]

People absorb ideas not through abstract thought, but through concrete pictures. The more concrete you are, the more effective you will be. Paint pictures for them. Use plenty of metaphors. The Bible is rich in metaphors. When Paul wrote "who shall deliver me from this body of death," his hearers would think in terms of the practice of chaining a dead body to a living prisoner. The books of Job or Hosea, for example, amaze us with the richness of their metaphors and the power they possess to convey ideas because of this.

Conclusion

To be an effective contemporary biblical preacher, be sure to discover: what the passage meant to the original listeners; the timeless truths in the pas sage; and how those truths can be applied today in the lives of your listeners. If this is done, you will preach the Word with interest and relevance.

Module 12
Session 2 – Lesson 1
Praying for People

The audience, aim, and appeal of the altar call by **Roger D. Willmore**

The altar call, or the public invitation, is an essential part of the pastor's preaching ministry. The Apostle Paul reminds us that the invitation for response comes from God and not from the preacher. Though the pastor extends the invitation, the call itself comes from God:

"In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed the message of reconciliation to us. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ; certain that God is appealing through us, we plead on Christ's behalf, 'Be reconciled to God'" **2 Co 5:19-20 HCSB**.

The pastor must keep the ultimate aim of his sermon in mind. He is not preaching simply to give information or even to inspire. The pastor preaches with a purpose. He must call for a verdict. The word he has preached demands a response. The following will determine what kind of altar call the pastor extends:

The Audience
A pastor's pulpit ministry and his pastoral ministry go hand in hand. Jesus described the unique relationship of shepherd to sheep and pastor to people when He said: "I am the good shepherd. I know My own sheep, and they know Me, as the Father knows Me, and I know the Father" (**Jn 10:14**). Since the pastor lives among his people and ministers to them on a daily basis, he will issue an invitation that reflects his knowledge of their needs as well as his compassion and personal concern for them.

The Aim
The ultimate aim of the invitation is to provide those who heard the sermon the opportunity to express obedience to the revealed truth of God's Word. Before the altar call is made, be sure that the truth has been presented clearly. The focus of the appeal will be determined by the varying and changing needs within the lives of those in the congregation. Since a sermon should always call for a response, the subject of the sermon will also determine the nature of the decisions the pastor encourages the people to make. Examples of decisions include:

- To receive Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior
- To be baptized as a public demonstration of obedience to Jesus as Lord

- To join the church fellowship (explain the method by which members are received)
- To repent of a specific sin that is hindering fellowship with God
- To renew commitment to grow toward spiritual maturity
- To pray for a lost person
- To request prayer for a personal need
- To respond to a specific challenge issued in the sermon

1 Ask everyone to bow their heads. Instruct everyone to close their eyes and bow their heads. Repeat these instructions while looking around, and continue past this point only when the majority of people have done as you have asked.

- Providing a certain degree of anonymity can relieve some of the pressure and make it easier for people to act—and to do so genuinely.
- Admitting that you are a sinner in need of salvation can be a vulnerable experience, and making such an admission in front of a large crowd can be so intimidating that a person might opt to avoid the experience altogether. This is especially true when you are working with teenagers, but it can also apply to groups of adults.
- On the other hand, if many people respond to the altar call, others may get swept up in the moment and respond without being truly ready for it at heart. Remember: the ultimate goal is to save souls, not to have an impressive-looking altar call. You want people to answer the call, but only if they are doing so for the right reason.

2 Instruct those who want to answer the call to look up. State that anyone who is ready to give his or her life to Christ—or anyone who wants to learn more about doing so—should lift his or her head and make eye contact with you.

- Another option would be to ask those who are ready to raise their hands instead of their heads. Both options are fairly common and typically yield similar results

3 Remain active in the process. Look around the entire room. Repeat the call at regular intervals. Acknowledge each person with whom you make eye contact.

- Most of the congregation will consist of people who have already accepted Christ and are not being spiritually prompted to respond to the current altar call. As you repeat the invitation to the altar, ask those who remain in their seats to take the time to reconnect with Christ and to pray for those who are accepting salvation for the first time.

4 Invite those who answered to the altar. When you sense that everyone who is ready to answer the call has looked up, invite those individuals to the altar while instructing the rest of the congregation to continue in prayer with closed eyes and bowed heads.

- Greet those at the altar with a friendly expression and kind words. Reassure them that the step they are taking here and now is a positive, life-saving one.

5 Send each person away with a counselor. Introduce each person standing before you at the altar to a counselor. Once everyone has been taken care of, send the counselors and potential converts to private rooms for further discussion.

- While the counseling sessions commence, the rest of the congregation should be invited to join in song. Worship should typically continue until everyone has had a chance to complete the brief counseling session, but if someone needs an extensive amount of time, you may need to conclude the service before that individual finishes.

Counsel the Called

1 Have plenty of trained counselors. Make the process as personal as possible by assigning only one person to each counselor during any given altar call. Provide your counselors with training so that they know how to handle the process appropriately, and make sure that they all take a Bible with them when they embark on a session.

- It can be difficult enough to open your heart to one person, so being put into a position in which you need to open your heart in front of a group can be even more difficult, even if the group is relatively small. For that reason, one-on-one counseling can encourage greater sincerity.

- Your counselors do not need extensive theological training, but they should be equipped with some basic review. Each counselor should know:
    - Where to go during the counseling session
    - What to say and what not to say
    - How to clearly explain God's plan of salvation
    - The importance of confidentiality

2 Ask the right questions. It's important to connect to those who responded to the call on an individual level since doing so can encourage them to accept Christ as their personal Savior. To that end, you need to ask questions that allow the individual to open up.

- The absolute first thing a counselor should do is ask for a name. After receiving a name, the counselor can also introduce himself or herself.
- Beyond that, ask questions about what made the individual respond to the message and what that individual is currently struggling with. From there, lead into the Gospel.

3 Focus on the Savior. Once the individual counseling sessions start, the focus should be on Christ. Specific sins and concerns can be brought up, but they should not distract from the primary purpose of the call.

- Ask about the individual's relationship with Jesus. Discuss whether he or she has such a relationship, what the quality of that relationship with, and how his or her current struggles with sin impact that relationship.
- Even though it should have been mentioned in the sermon, each counselor should also discuss humanity's sinful nature and the need for a Savior.

4 Pray with each person. Instead of asking each person to repeat a generic “Sinner's Prayer,” encourage new converts to pray for repentance from the heart. Rely on a formulaic prayer only if the new believer doesn't know what to say.

- The words may not be eloquent, but there's nothing wrong with that. Jesus is concerned with the heart, so an awkward yet sincere prayer means more than a graceful yet insincere one.

- Counselors can (and should) guide the individual through the process of confessing his or her sins, asking for God's forgiveness, and committing his or her life to Christ.

5 Present the new converts. Consider presenting those who have just accepted Christ to the rest of the congregation at the end of the service.

- Standing before the congregation can make new believers feel reassured and welcomed into the Church.
- Encourage this step without demanding it. Do not force anyone to stand before the congregation if they feel uncomfortable doing so.

How to Botch an Altar Call:
A few keys for those who don't want people saved in their altar calls.

1. **Present an unbalanced message.** Only let them see the heart-warming part of God's character. Preach God's love but leave out His holiness and justice. That way they'll think He'll let them into heaven no matter what.

2. **Don't mention repentance until they're repeating a "sinner's prayer."** Just get them to say, "I repent of all my sins" while they're echoing you. They won't know what they're saying and they won't count the cost.

3. **Above all else, be dignified.** Don't get heart to heart with the people. They would get something out of what you said.

4. **Skim over the gospel and push the prayer.** Pretend the lost naturally understand what Christ has done for them.

5. **Preach Jesus as a life enhancer not a life rescuer.** Tell them how Jesus can improve their life but don't show them Jesus as the only One who can save them from Hell. People will think if they reject Him they're only losing out on a spiritual high.

6. **Try to please the people instead of convert them.** Tell them what they want to hear instead of what they need to hear.

7. **Compromise the message to speed up the process.** The Christians who have heard it a hundred times before will be pleased with that. The quicker they get out the quicker

they can get to the restaurant.

8. **Give them the impression that God is so good He won't send anyone to hell.** Don't present the whole counsel of God or they might realize He is so good that He'll see to it that justice is served and that all unrepentant sinners will be punished in the fire that is not quenched.

9. **Speak to sinners as though they were saints.** They'll think they're God's children instead of the enemies of God they've made themselves into because of their sin. You'll give them false assurance and mislead them.

10. **Don't mention sin or man's guilt.** Resist the urge to explain what Christ came to deliver us from. Don't show them their need for the Savior. Otherwise it may all make sense.

11. **Don't look to the Bible for the substance of your altar call.** Only mimic other preachers with large congregations.

12. **Tell the lost not to feel bad about their sins.** That way you will work against the Holy Spirit who's convicting them

13. **Whatever you do, never mention Judgment Day.** Your audience might take spiritual matters seriously.

14. **Tell them Jesus is the only way to heaven but don't explain why.** They may think it's nothing more than fear tactics and leave offended instead of enlightened.

15. **Confuse the call.** This is a great way to botch up an altar call. Don't let people know you're asking them to commit their life to Christ. Be vague and general in what you're saying. Neglect to mention following Christ in your evangelistic altar calls and say things like, "If you don't feel you're as close to God as possible raise your hand," "If you feel lonely come to the front for prayer," "If you want more of God this is your time," and, "If you have struggles and need the answer come down." Just get them to raise a hand. That way no one will be able to count the cost and you'll even get saints to respond to salvation altar calls, making the results look more successful.

16. **Only give them half the story.** Tell them Jesus died to forgive everyone but overlook the fact that they must personally receive Him to partake of that forgiveness.

17. **Present the truth as though it isn't.** Be so funny when you share Christ that you belittle the seriousness of the matter.

18. **Preach forgiveness without repentance.** That way no one will know how to be forgiven.

19. **Be unbiblical.** Present repentance and faith as an offer instead of how God does as a command (Acts 17:30).

20. **Let them think next Sunday is the day of salvation.** Don't make them feel it's urgent to respond today.

21. **Never warn of hell.** Dangle heaven in front of their nose but rarely mention hell, certainly not as much as Jesus did.

22. **Only do altar calls inside the church.** Never take the gospel where sinners congregate. The lost might get saved.

23. **Use churchy terms.** Use words like, "saved," "repent," and "born again," without any explanation. That way your hearers won't comprehend what you're saying. If they can't understand it, it's probable they won't be changed by it.

24. **Give false assurance of salvation to unsaved Christians.** Assure church folk that they are saved even if they bear no fruit. So that you don't offend the unsaved pew warmers never quote 2 Corinthians 13:5: "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith." You could lose some financial supporters and have to depend on God.

25. **Never mention the wrath of God.** If you mention it, people might be awakened to flee to Jesus who "saves us from the wrath to come." (1 Thess. 1:10)

26. **Study how the apostles preached and witnessed and do the opposite.** Don't explain Jesus' suffering death on the cross. Otherwise they may think of running to Him for forgiveness. Don't speak of His burial or resurrection or they might realize He is God. Refrain from commenting about the hundreds of eyewitnesses who saw Jesus after He rose from the dead. That way they can go on thinking He's a fairy tale. Overlook talk of the messianic prophecies Jesus fulfilled or they might realize that the Bible is true. If they see it's the truth they may see that following Christ is the logical decision. And whatever you do, avoid what the apostles did when it came time to call people to obey the gospel. Don't tell them to trust Christ and live for Him. That is too accurate. If they know how to get saved your altar call will be a success.

27. **Put more emphasis on the "sinner's prayer" then on repentance and faith.** Satan will smile over your departure from Biblical instruction. We are never taught to use a 'sinner's prayer' throughout the entire Bible. If you decide to use it and put more emphasis on the technique than on what we're commanded to preach: faith and repentance you'll certainly botch things up. A 'sinner's prayer' doesn't equal salvation, only faith in Christ and repentance toward God do.

28. **Let Christians think you're the only one who can do it right.** Always leave the impression that they should only invite friends to church and never actually witness

themselves. It will keep you in business and the lost unsaved.

29. **Don't let the lost know they are.** Disregard subjects like Judgment Day, God's holiness, man's sinfulness and justice. That way the lost can continue to think they're "good enough" to get into heaven.

30. **Rely upon psychological techniques to manipulate people into responding to the altar call.** Don't rely upon the Holy Spirit or they may actually get saved.

31. **Make sure you're the main attraction.** Remember the goal in botching up an altar call is for people to leave and say, "What a wonderful preacher," instead of, "What a wonderful Savior." Draw all possible attention to how great a speaker and person you are. Otherwise people might see Christ in your preaching and get saved.

32. **Don't focus upon Jesus.** Finally, the best way to botch up an altar call is not to preach the gospel. Just get people to lift up a hand and pray a prayer with you. Resist the urge to speak of the only One who could save them.

Sometimes the best way to get a point across is to put it in a different light. You now know a few ways to botch up an altar call. Please do not employ them. Do the opposite. You may already do some of them. Don't let pride keep you from changing and doing things in a Biblical fashion. The bottom line is how true we are to Christ and His word. Effectively reaching the lost is our purpose. Let nothing hold you back from that agenda. May God bless you as you seek to win people to Christ in Bible clubs, churches, conferences, on the street witnessing encounters, at your school, and at your workplace.

Adapted from Becoming an Emissary for God by Allen Atzbi

Module 12
Session 2 – Lesson 2
Celebrating God

Celebrating Christian Community

One of the most impressive creative works of God in the world today is the community of Christian believers. Distributed across the face of the globe, in some places free and highly visible, in others persecuted and completely out of sight, the universal church gives witness to the power of God and the reality of Jesus in the world after 2000 years of turbulent history. Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matthew 16: 18).

Christians are everywhere

It has been my joy over many years to meet Christians from all walks of life, in different parts of the world, and to celebrate the diversity and vibrancy of what the Bible refers to as the "Body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:22-24). We are His presence in the world. There is no human organisation that even comes near to approximating the mystical, supernatural corpus we know as the Christian community. I never cease to be amazed how easy it is to connect with genuine Christians on first meeting them, not because we necessarily share ethnic identity, social status, physical characteristics or even a structured organisational "unity". Nor because the people I encounter have social skills others do not possess. The unique relationship experienced between Christians is generated by the Holy Spirit. The church of which He is the CEO is bigger than any of us imagines.

The New Testament church was born a little over seventy days after the ascension of the risen Christ to the right hand of God, when thousands of men and women from all over the then Jewish Diaspora were converted on the Jewish Day of Pentecost (read the account in Acts Chapter 2). Starting its life as a sect of Judaism, the Christian community quickly spread out and embraced people of many different cultures. As it did so, communities of interest coalesced around shared identities, languages and backgrounds. The ministry of the apostles was not unduly affected by this development. For the sake of operational convenience, Peter and their co-workers and Paul agreed to function as apostles to the Jews and Gentiles respectively (Galatians 2:9). At the end of the day, neither side ceased to be part of "one body" in Christ, simply because they had elected (or been led by the Holy Spirit) to operate on different "playing fields". The same Lord was at work in each of them.

Times have changed. Today, there are thousands of denominations in Christendom. Many of them are only different in terms of name or governmental structure. Others are mortal foes and their "testimony" has been to sin and selfishness rather than to Jesus Christ. In the midst of all this man-made diversity stand genuine Christians who recognise one another when they meet and know the value of fellowship.

What is fellowship?

The word "fellowship" (my father used to say it meant "fellows on the one ship, a word picture that made sense) is widely used in the secular community.

I was once asked to be guest of honour at a major anniversary of Rotary International chapter overseas. I am not a Rotarian, but circumstances created the opportunity and I celebrated the event with my new friends. The focus of the evening was the great work undertaken by the chapter in improving the circumstances of people in the community. These people had something in common. They shared goals and identities and spoke repeatedly about their "fellowship". If they met Rotarians in other parts of the world, they celebrated the organisation and its universal goals.

Likewise, a billion Muslims celebrate the "Umma", the international community of believers that prays around the clock, like a global "Mexican wave" of prayer calls and responses continually moving around the world. Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting and feasting, is a unique event that commemorates key events in the history of Islam, drawing together Muslim men and women in a sense of purpose and commitment.

"Fellowship" is a natural response to man as a social being. If you watch Jews praying at the "Wailing Wall" in Jerusalem there is an aura of community at prayer. (The Wailing Wall is a retaining wall of the Second Temple compound, destroyed by the Romans in AD70. Today it is also part of the disputed hilltop that Jews call the Temple Mount and Muslims call Haram al-Sharif.) "Community" is implicit in celebrations of Passover, Yom Kippur, Hannukah and other Jewish feasts around the world. Many cultures and religions celebrate global community. Communism attempts to force unity and uniformity by fostering notions of an internal utopia and external enemies.

So, what's the difference?

In Christian circles the celebration of "fellowship" can be confused with sitting in a church building looking at the back of someone else's head, having a casual drink and conversation or a meal together, or listening to a Christian message. Curiously, we often say we have "fellowship" when we are in a church program situation, but don't use the term when we meet with some of the same people socially.

The operative New Testament word is "koinonia", which implies "having in common". It appears seventeen times in the New Testament. The first Christians shared their material possessions and often lived together or in close community (Acts 4:34-35). Becoming a Christian was described as being "added to the church" (Acts 2:47). They worshipped together. On one level, it made sense for them to support one another, because they were opposed and vilified by non-Christians. But this was not the reason they operated in a spirit of "koinonia". Christians who travelled could be accepted by communities hundreds or thousands of kilometres away on the strength of a letter of recommendation from their home church. What

made them one was the work of Christ in their hearts. Even when their leaders differed on points of structure, they still considered themselves one. Poor Christians in Jerusalem found Christian groups in Greek communities taking up offerings and sending them financial assistance. What they had was trans-cultural, bigger than religious expression or the forced political and legal unity of *Pax Romans* (the Roman Peace), which held the known world under a common framework.

Their unity was an expression of Christ. Jesus prayed they would be one, as he and the Father were one (John 17:21. Their leaders stressed the importance of unity, of understating the fact that they were all different, had diverse backgrounds and skills, but were still part of "one" body. They complemented one another. Whether or not they were aware of one another, or had even met, they sensed oneness with Christian believers in other parts of the empire. Christians today can empathise with, and intercede for, Christians they have never met in places they will probably never see, knowing they are part of the same Body. "If one suffers, all suffer" (1 Corinthians 12:26). The unity we have is solely because of Christ; if we are in fellowship with Him, we are related to others who share that relationship (1 John 1:3). This gives us the capacity to rise above social, racial, political and cultural differences. Koinonia is not about us, it is about Christ and the abundant life we share in Him. The Bible says that where brethren dwell together in unity God commands a blessing (Psalm 133).

Biblical fellowship explained

Jesus called his first disciples to live with him. Biblical fellowship is not ecumenism. It is not a structural entity. It is ironic but true that many attempts at ecumenism end up contributing to division. Fellowship is an expression of Christ, a community of God's people that engenders unity. Does this mean we should sell the sanctuaries where we meet to worship, pray and grow in our Biblical knowledge? Not necessarily, however it is worth considering how much more effective we might be if our resources were able to be shared and surpluses used to building the Kingdom of God.

There are many valid reasons not to insist on slavishly adopting other peoples' models, even models adopted by the Jerusalem church. There the believers had everything in common and there was no sense of private ownership. There is no evidence this format was adopted by churches established and operating elsewhere at the same time, so we cannot be legalistic about precedents.

Why do Christians need to gather together anyway? Who needs more social commitments eating into his or her valuable time? The answer lies in a letter written to a group of Hebrew Christians in New Testament days. The letter encouraged them to meet regularly, for mutual edification (or building up). Responding to a growing trend to neglect such meetings, the writer warned his readers not to neglect gathering together but to use every opportunity they had to encourage one another (Hebrews 10:25).

Which denomination is best? Few young people in the West remain tied to the denominational franchise model of church. Denominations (some a perhaps more akin to “demonations”) are simply the way we organise ourselves to serve God. As human creations they are fraught with human weaknesses, but we can usually tolerate them as places we can gather to worship and serve God corporately. It is important that the “place” me meet with other Christians be real and that it be Bible-based and Jesus-centred, focusing on Christian growth and witness, while not claiming to be exclusive.

The house church “movement” is predicated on a healthy desire for simple Christian living, unencumbered by structures, synods, constitutions and offices. What often happens, in practice, is that house churches simply become microcosms of denominations. Someone has to take charge, to lead, to make decisions. (Otherwise autonomy becomes anarchy.) A sense of exclusiveness often marks such attempts; the successful small group usually does not remain small and growth generates the need for organisation and direction.

We need to recapture community, with shared purpose, shared equality (but recognising different functions) and shared ultimate vision. Community where Christians share spiritual gifts, character development, healing, prayer, teaching, worship, characterised by generosity, support, understanding in times of relationship breakdown, bereavement or disappointment, career planning and the discovery and use of abilities and gifts, If we force the reconstruction of community to fit pre-designed models it can simply be a result of the “flesh”.

Changing formats

Christian formation and attendance patterns are changing. Discipleship courses are available, however not all of them are in “church”. In a bizarre twist, it is now possible to complete such courses by distance participation. Founder of the Methodist Church English clergyman John Wesley built a “class” system to skill new converts. He believed it was necessary to bring people together physically to teach them Christian truth and emphasised the value of inclusive relationships with other believers. Home Groups (action groups, growth cells, call them what you will) can be part of the church’s backbone, but only if relevant, inclusive, functional, flexible and attractive. Fellowship needs to promote personal growth through learning, belonging and involvement. It must stand for connectedness, participation, communication, comradeship and shared experiences. It must have an active concern for those on the fringe of church life and a meaningful regime care for Christian young people and the unique problems they face.

Australians continue to search for meaningful community, to which they can belong, where they can find identity and security, makes sense intellectually and speaks to them holistically. For many people the church provides an important sense of community, purpose and belonging.

The importance of fellowship in integrating new people into a meaningful church community needs to be recognised. Programs cannot replace personal contact and connections.

The impact of individualism

Western culture today is increasingly characterised by “rugged individualism”. Individualistic pursuit is prized in sport, the arts, career, education, politics and wealth. This expression is endemic throughout the Christian community as well. When people make decisions to follow Christ, they usually do so as individuals (other cultures would do so at family or even community level). As a result, church attendance has become a form. We know very little about Christians attending our own churches. Think of Christians you know. You may talk about unity, perhaps even hang out in a home group or Bible study. But how well do you know them? Who are the key people in their lives? What is the nature of their work? What is their family history? What are their passions, their likes, dislikes, their greatest joys and aches. What is their world view or philosophy? What are they going through right now? Do you know? Do you care? Or do you shrug your shoulders and sigh, “God, I’m not responsible for him”. That’s what Cain said about his brother Abel (after he murdered him and hid his body in the ground). Someone has said that every person is linked to the rest of the world through a chain of only six people. However, our rugged individualism has isolated us from people we attend church with each week.

Let’s rediscover community and fellowship, without borders and without denominational demarcation. Let’s make a decision to grow together and support other parts of the Body of Christ. As our secular communities become fragmented, let’s offer a Christian faith that is relevant and powerful because it is built on relationship rooted in Jesus Christ.

Module 12

Session 2 – Lesson 3

Finding a Mentor