



# CHURCH ESSENTIALS

You've heard the saying, and maybe you've said it yourself at some point: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." Yet as much as we know that words cannot physically hurt us, everyone knows that this little saying is not true. Words are powerful. They have a way to go deep into the heart of someone to either build up or destroy. A well-timed word can be incredibly effective in either making someone's day or destroying any hope that someone has.

There is a good reason that words are so powerful – because God is the God of words. He created the universe by the Word; he sustains the universe by the word of his power; he has revealed himself by words, and it is because of words that we can know and be known. God has given us his Word – the Bible itself – which is described as living and active, sharper than a double edged sword. In other words, words are transformative. God has designed words so that they have an ability to act upon others. He has designed it so that his communication with us is by words and our communication back to him is through words.

Because this is the way that God has designed communication, it shouldn't surprise us that the Bible is the primary way God speaks to us and prayer is the primary way we speak to God. These ordinary acts of speaking are the source of our relationship with God and God with us. God has spoken, and he invites us to take his words and speak them back to him. And this becomes the essential pattern for pastoral ministry – the first and foundational ministry of the Church that creates Christians and causes Christians to grow. So let's consider what is this focus, why it's the focus, and the result of this focus.

## **What is the focus of Pastoral Ministry?**

In Acts 6, a problem arises. There has become a racial divide between the Hebraic and Greek speaking Jewish widows. The racial divide threatened the unity of the early Church – it could mean that some Christians would be treated better than others; it also meant that the racial problems would become a threat to the witness of Christians because of a failure to love. Because some were receiving care while others were being neglected, the internal strength and external witness were at stake. In response to this, the apostles come together to address this issue. They seek to appoint seven godly men to care for the equitable distribution of food while they make their priority the ministry of prayer and the Word. And we are told that this pleased the whole group.

What we need to understand is that there are different ministries that the Lord calls us to. The ministry of service is a vital and Spirit ordained ministry. The ministry of service is critical to the internal health and external witness of the Church. Both the pastoral ministry of Word & prayer and the practical ministry of spiritual care are necessary and require people to be devoted in full time ministry.

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But the focus of pastoral ministry – the apostolic ministry – is directly tied to the ministry of Word and prayer. This does not mean that serving others is less important. It means that God has called different people to different ministries. But the apostolic focus of the Church begins with prayer and the Word. The witness of the Church depends on the ministry of prayer and the Word. But it is not the only ministry.

Last week, Will spoke from 1 Peter 5 about the need for elders to oversee the Church. The task of elders is not in the running of programs nor in the act of service. The elders oversee the ministry. But the primary way they give oversight to the ministry is by prayer and the Word. Because God has created and sustains the universe by the Word, because God has revealed himself by words, it would be foolish and destructive for elders to focus on anything else. The health and well-being of the Church depends upon the ministry of prayer and the Word.

## **Why is Prayer & the Word the focus of Pastoral Ministry?**

There are two primary reasons given why prayer and the Word are the focus of pastoral ministry.

### **a. Unity in the Faith**

The aim of pastoral ministry is unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God. How do you get this aim? Paul makes it clear in Ephesians 4:13 that this is the goal of the Church – spiritual unity. But how does unity come about?

During the pandemic, many congregations were ripped apart by division. Many churches became focused on what are Christian rights – what is our right in the world? As a result, many churches were ripped apart by politics, masks, vaccines, and other presenting issues. These issues are important, but as a church here we made it our aim that we were going to have gospel priorities. We looked at Romans 12-14 and discussed five gospel principles that were going to guide us. We made it our aim to focus on what is central to hold us together. We talked about Gospel Unity, Gospel Love, Gospel Submission, Gospel Humility, and Gospel Sacrifice. By centering around how Jesus Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension unified us, we held together. In fact, so many of you said that you were thankful how we came out of the pandemic because of our relentless focus on these issues. It didn't mean that we did everything right; it meant we kept our eyes on the main thing.

Paul says that our faith finds unity not in an experience, but in a faith that is grounded in truth that produces a unifying experience – a knowledge of the Son of God. We can only grow as a church by keeping our eyes centered on what God has said and we can only grow as we respond back to God by bringing his Words back to him.

### **b. Spiritually Mature Body**

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The result of this relentless focus, Paul says, is a spiritually mature man. This means that there is no room for inactivity on those who attend. Pastoral ministry connects with Christians to disciple each one of the body so that as elders equip, various ministries function in gospel-centered ways. Everything that the church does flows out of these gospel realities. So Word and prayer is central. The reason for this focus is that there are 10,000 good things that churches can do and ought to do. But if the focus gets off of Word and prayer, the church loses her center. What happens when a wheel's center is moved? Everything else is thrown out of kilter. The wheel wobbles.

The same is true in a church. When prayer and the Word are not the pastoral focus, people do not grow into spiritually mature people. Instead, other foci take over. Churches lose their mission and unity when they take their eye off of what causes spiritually mature people.

As you are grounded in the gospel, what effect it has is it reorients our perspective on everything. Leadership, service, ministry, care, work, relationships all get reoriented when the gospel is central. Having a gospel-centered focus keeps us as a church moving together. The center holds us like spokes moving out from the hub. We are being taught how Christ is central to all of life. Our work and witness is not disconnected. Our dependence upon God and our need for his power grounds us.

When prayer and the Word are the center, everything that flows out is gospelized. This is what happens in Acts 6. Racial tensions are resolved by gospel priorities. Care of physical needs is resolved by gospel priorities. When we take our eye off the gospel, we discover that the center doesn't hold. But when the center is held, the wheel turns.

## **What is the result of focusing on Prayer and the Word in Pastoral Ministry?**

In the book of Acts, we see that there are two results by focusing on prayer and the Word.

### **Spiritual Strength**

In Acts 4:29, as the church faces increased opposition, the apostles pray to the Sovereign Lord, the One who spoke the Word. And as they pray, notice how they pray. In 4:24 they return to the Sovereign Lord who created all things by the Word of his power. They pray for boldness. They ask God to fill them by his Spirit so that they might speak the Word.

We need more spiritual power. We need more strength and resolve. We need help in the days where we feel opposition. And we need to do that by coming together to pray.



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One of the things we are aiming to do is return to a pattern of prayer. We have our Wednesday morning times to pray. These are vital for the life of the church! We have our praise and prayer nights, and we want to grow in using these times to pray together.

We need to pray because as we pray, God hears his words and commands and responds by answering us! He will do what he said he will do, and prayer is one way that we show that we believe that he will answer us. He gives us power as we pray and depend upon his Word. We take God's words and return them back to him.

This is essentially what prayer is – it is us talking to God. It is us reminding God of what he has said. It is taking the promises of Scripture and praying them in and out so that we might believe what God has said and asking God to ask to do what he has said he would do. He loves to hear his children depend upon him. And Acts 4:29-31 tells us that as they prayed, they were filled with boldness to proclaim the word of God with all boldness.

Prayer is what links the Word with the Spirit's power. And the result then is...

## **Gospel Growth**

Throughout the book of Acts, what happens when the Church prays and relies upon the Word and prayer is that the good news of Jesus advances. At several key points in the book of Acts, we are told that the gospel goes forward with this description: the Word of God increased or multiplied. In Acts 6:7, the result of gospel priorities was that "the Word of God continued to increase." This phrase is used again in Acts 12:24 and 19:20. Interestingly, the book of Acts is full of sermons from Peter and Paul, along with other figures including Stephen, Philip, and James. As the apostles focused on the Word, the church grew. As they spread their knowledge of the Son of God, others heard and believed. As they proclaimed the message, the church was strengthened with the message to go out.

You see, the Word is the hero in the book of Acts. As much as it is the Acts of the Apostles, the living Word, Jesus Christ gives the increase. All of our plans, strategies, methods, and approaches will fail unless the Word is central.

The reason the Word spreads, increases, and multiplies, is that this is not a static word. Just as God created the world by his Word (Gen. 1:3; John 1:1), it is his Word that produces the new creation; God has said that his Word will not return to him without doing its transforming work (Isa. 55:10-13).

There are many tasks that churches can and should do. There are many ministries that churches can do. But the engine in the tank, the fuel for ministry, the power to move forward comes by prayer and the Word. God has said he would honour his name and his Word (Ps. 138:2). When we make the Word of God and prayer our priority, we will discover something powerful. God

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gives us power to shape all of life around the sacrificial servanthood of Christ. The Saviour who came, who loved us, who gave himself for us, will begin to shape how we minister. And the result is that it will fuel all of ministry. It will bring us together in unity of the faith. It will make us mature. And it will show the world that Jesus Christ is our God.