

*Gospel Growth: Praying, Waiting, Pursuing*

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I don't often change my preaching plans last minute. But this is going to be one of those times. In the past couple weeks there have been some interesting developments in our pursuit of church planting / church revitalization. And I'm eager to share that with you. But I want to share that with you, not just in the context of an announcement, but in the context of the things we've been studying and praying about over the past 2 years.

This will be a sermon reviewing and reminding us of some of the passages we've talked about, prayed through together, studied together, in exploring a paradigm shift toward church planting.

The first 2 passages I'm going to read are from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. These are prayers that he prays on their behalf. We can think of them as prayers for revival, prayers for Gospel passion.

Read Ephesians 1:15-23 and 3:14-21

As we've talked about a paradigm shift toward church planting, we've started here in talking about the need for personal revival. Each of us needs to have the eyes of our hearts enlightened. We need to be strengthened with power in order to know the love of Christ. We need to give Him all the glory. We need to thank Him and rejoice in Him. And we ought to pray for this personal revival, pray for Gospel passion, and pray that out of it will come a passion for Gospel multiplication.

Let me remind you of the journey we've been on the past couple years.

Two years ago we began to share that God has been leading the elders, and the elders are seeking to lead this congregation, on a path of Gospel multiplication. As the third line of our mission statement says, we exist to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world. There is a global component to that mission. We are passionate about overseas missions, frontier missions, mission ventures to the unreached people groups of the world. And there's also a local component to this mission. God has given us a passion to be moving out into more parts of this region. So what we've

been hoping for and praying for is that God would enable us to multiply ourselves by planting additional churches.

Previously (that is, prior to 2014), we had been searching for one larger church building in a central location. But then God brought the leadership through this paradigm shift to think in terms of doing 2 things rather than 1. Let's root ourselves here and continue ministering in this community, and also begin planning for an additional location in some other part of the region.

We began talking about this with the deacons early in 2014 and then shared it in the quarterly meeting in March of that year. And then I preached a sermon series on Gospel Growth starting the last week of April and 3 Sundays in May (so exactly 2 years ago). We also developed a prayer guide that we distributed. We had a special prayer gathering up at the overlook. Some of you remember that. That fall we did the Christianity Explained study in our small groups, encouraging outreach and evangelism. In the spring of 2015 we did a SS class through the book of Acts, examining the message and the mission and means. What is the content of the Gospel being proclaimed (the message)? What are we to do with this message (mission)? And how, specifically is that mission being carried out (means)?

At the start of this year we hosted a 9 Marks Workshop on the marks of a healthy church, and since church planting had been on our radar for some time we chose Mike McKinley to be our speaker, being that he had experience in church planting / church revitalizing and had written a book related to these things. So we thought he would be a great person to bring in and teach us not only about the marks of a healthy church, but also how churches can be involved in multiplication. And that was a great weekend, for those of you who participated in it. We were able to minister to many churches in the region and also learn a lot ourselves. And Mike stayed and taught our Sunday School that Sunday and preached in our worship service. I'm going to review some of his points from that sermon in just a bit.

We also are now going through a Sunday School series on evangelism. All of these pieces have been related to, in one way or another, our ongoing to passion to see Gospel multiplication happening.

At the outset, when we began talking about church planting, there was no particular location in mind. But as we thought further, we honed in on the north hills. We have a good group of folks from the church living north of the city, and there's also lots of growth happening in Cranberry and the surrounding

communities. Specifically, the Wexford / Warrendale areas were mentioned, and a building search process was active. We had also thought through potential schedules that would allow me to preach at both locations (an early service at one location, later service at the other). There was a lot of effort being put into how to make this happen, how to get started. I'll come back to this at the end of the message.

But now I want to bring to our remembrance some of those Scripture passages we meditated on in the sermon series and in prayer times. In that sermon series on Gospel Growth which I preached in May of 2014, the first sermon was on praying for Gospel passion. That's where we looked at those prayers of the Apostle Paul in the letter to the Ephesians. Last Sunday in Sunday School we spent some time looking over those prayers again, and I have copies of that prayer guide in the hallway for you to take on your way out. Pray for your own Gospel passion. Pray for power to know the love of Christ. Repent of your sins. Repent of pride and self-centeredness. God deserves all the glory. Praise God for His amazing attributes.

I have to tell you it was so encouraging to attend the prayer group here last night. We have some folks here who are passionate about prayer, passionate about the glory of Christ, passionate to see the Gospel spread throughout Pittsburgh. And it was such an exciting time for me to pray with them, and to hear them pray for me and for my preaching, and for the many ministries that folks in this church are involved in. God is certainly on the move among us, and that is thrilling to me!

The second sermon I preached in that series was focused solely on unpacking the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which I did from that great paragraph in Romans 3:21-26. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," which is why we need the Gospel. We're all condemned to eternal punishment if someone doesn't save us. And the only way to be saved is through Jesus Christ, "whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood." That means that God poured out His wrath against sin upon His own Son. That happened at the cross. Jesus took the punishment for our sin as He suffered there on the cross. And then He rose again on the third day. And it's through faith that sinners get connected to the benefits of Christ's death. Not everyone's sins are just automatically forgiven. It's through repentance and faith that a person comes into a saving relationship with Him. This is the Good News that we are so passionate about, and so passionate to make known to others.

The third message was on the theme of the Gospel for all peoples. We saw in John 10 God's sovereignty in salvation and how that is a great motivation for us in pursuing Gospel growth. We can pray for our unbelieving friends with the knowledge that God is a missionary God and He is calling people to Himself. God is powerful to save. So there's hope! I encouraged us all to think of 5 people you know who are not Christians, and to simply pray for those individuals each day for a month. I challenge again today to do that. God will work through those prayers. God will use those prayers to change hearts. God will use those prayers to change us.

And then in the fourth and final sermon in that series, I tried to impress upon us the truth that we, as Christians, as the church, are called to Gospel multiplication. God is a missionary God. He is an evangelistic God. He is a God who is reaching out to those who do not yet know Him. And He has called His people to pursue this mission with Him. Not that He needs us. But He has chosen to accomplish His work through us.

Think of the story of Cornelius in Acts 10. Cornelius was a commanding officer in the Roman army. He was a Gentile. And He feared God and prayed to God. He had a vision of an angel telling him to send for a man named Peter, who was in another city.

The next day God gave Peter a vision. Then the Spirit told Peter to go with the 3 men who had been sent by Cornelius. Peter did so. And Peter then had a wide open door to tell Cornelius and his relatives and friends all about Jesus. The preaching was effective. It was immediately fruitful. The people received the Spirit and were baptized.

The point I'm wanting to highlight is that God used a person—Peter—to come right to the home of Cornelius, and personally tell him about Jesus.

Or think of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). An angel told Philip to go south to a particular road, and then the Spirit told Philip to go over by this guy's chariot. The guy just happened to be reading from the prophet Isaiah, from Isaiah 53 which we studied at Easter-time this year, and Philip got to explain to him what it was all about. His explanation would have gone something like this: Jesus is the sheep who was slaughtered . . . for us. His blood covers our sin. Repent and believe and be baptized. My point again is that God used a person to open the Scriptures and preach the Gospel. God works through people.

And we can't hear that and just think of other people whom God uses. Oh yeah, those who are gifted in evangelism will go and do that. It's certainly true that some folks are especially gifted and called to the work of evangelism. But that doesn't mean the rest of us can outsource that task. It's something every Christian is to be involved in somehow. Every disciple of Jesus is called to participate.

Before I read that Great Commission passage from Matthew 28, remember back to the beginning of the Old Testament where God was already revealing His plan for Gospel growth. God made an amazing promise to Abraham. He said, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). The thing that makes that promise all the more amazing is the fact that it comes right after several chapters that record the downward spiral of humanity. Adam and Eve rebelled against God, and the devastating effects were immediately evident. Things got so bad so quickly, that by chapter 6 of Genesis God decided to flood the earth and destroy everything, except Noah and his family. Then there was the tower of Babel, which the people tried to build in order to make a name for themselves. A prideful, man-centered, God-despising act. This is the depraved condition of the human heart following the Fall. This is the depraved condition of each one of us before and until Christ saves us.

But after those accounts of human wickedness and depravity in the book of Genesis, God makes this wonderful promise to Abraham. Now how is God going to do this, how is He going to bless all the families of the earth? He sent His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, who is The Seed of Abraham and in whom the promises to Abraham find fulfillment. And all the families of the earth will be blessed as the Gospel of Jesus Christ reaches them.

God is a missionary God, and He promised from the beginning that His grace would extend to the whole world, to all the people groups of the world. Jesus restated this promise when He said in Matthew 24:14, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." And Jesus instructs us to be part of what He is doing. He has called us, commissioned us, commanded us, to pursue Gospel multiplication.

Read Matthew 28:16-20

It's very beautiful how this Great Commission is expressed by Jesus. Notice that the actual command is sandwiched between a declaration of Jesus' sovereignty and the promise of His presence with us. What better command could there be? What more exciting mission could there be? First Jesus tells His disciples (and this includes us) that He possesses all authority in heaven and on

earth. That is an awesome statement. And it's absolutely true. Jesus is in control. No power will succeed against Him. And then in the very last sentence of the Gospel of Matthew is recorded Jesus' words saying, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Jesus came into this world as Immanuel, which means, God with us. We read that in Matthew 1. Now at the very end of this Gospel, we read Jesus' words saying I am with you always.

Meditate on that, brothers and sisters. The Sovereign Lord of the universe is with you always. On our own, we might cower in fear. We could be paralyzed in our frailty and weakness. But with Almighty Jesus at our side, what do we have to fear? Why would we be intimidated by a humanly impossible task? All things are possible with Him.

As the great missionary, William Carey, said, "Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God." We know He's powerful and that He's with us. That emboldens us to radical obedience. And what is the great thing Jesus is calling us to here? Disciple-making. That is the main verb in the Great Commission. That is the imperative, the command. There are four components here, as we look closely at the wording. Go, make disciples, baptize, and teach. What you can't see in the English translations is that "make disciples" is the main verb, and the other three are participles which modify that main verb. So the big concept is disciple making, and the ways that happens is first of all by us going, and by us baptizing those who respond to the Gospel, and by us teaching these individuals to walk in the ways that Jesus has taught us.

Now I want to connect that with some of the things Mike McKinley preached to us when he was here in February. His first point was that the Gospel has a built-in centrifugal force. The Good News is always moving out. Acts 1:8 for instance, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." We saw it here in the Great Commission as well, "Go." The Gospel goes forth. God uses His people, us, to move the message outward, to carry it to more and more people.

Mike McKinley's first point was just that, that the Gospel goes forth, it moves outward. His second point was that the *way* the Gospel spreads is through the spread of the local church. God saves a people for Himself, and He puts His Gospel on display through His redeemed people. 1 Peter 2:9, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own

possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Our evangelism is not just something we do individually. It's much bigger than that. There is something going on here in our Christian community, in our relationships with one another, that bears witness to what God has done and is doing in our lives. We've had some good discussions about these things in our Sunday School series on evangelism over the past few weeks. There is something very important about our corporate witness. The world will see something of the love of Christ and the transforming power of the Gospel as they see the way we love each other, forgive each other, show kindness to one another, and work in unity together for the good of others and the glory of God. Because when those kinds of things happen, it becomes clear that we're dealing with something supernatural. Sin will cause division and grumbling and backbiting and competitiveness and jealousy and many other destructive things. But the grace of God will build a community that moves in the opposite direction. And that is very unique in this world. There is that corporate witness that puts a spotlight on the Gospel just in the way we relate to one another. A non-Christian can step into one of our small groups or one of our church meetings, and they should be able to get a sense of that loving Christian community.

And then there's also the aspect of our complementary spiritual gifts working together in evangelism. The way Mike McKinley described this has stuck with me, and it's exciting to me to think about. One person may be outgoing and great at making new friends, but not so good at actually sharing the Gospel message. Another person may be great at hospitality, but has trouble taking a conversation deeper into spiritual matters. Another person has a passion for prayer and spends much time praying for the church and for unbelievers. And yet another person is an introvert, but is gifted at articulating the Gospel and teaching biblical truth. Any of these individuals on their own may not be very effective in evangelism. But together, with that mixture of gifts, there's really some powerful ministry that can happen.

Be thinking about yourself, what your own gifting is, and how you and your believing friends can put your gifts together for the spread of the Gospel. Again, it was exciting to be at the prayer group last night because the discussion came up about our outreach dinners. And I didn't initiate that. But the discussion was when we should do another one and who's going to get the food and who's going to cook the food, and going out to invite people, etc. And I saw the the body working together in a passion for reaching

this community for Christ. And then we spent time praying about it, too.

You may feel afraid and frail on your own. But get together with some other believers in the church, and let's work together in this. That's precisely what God intends.

Well, with all of that as review, let me now tell you about an exciting opportunity that God seems to be putting in front of us. Just one more brief thing, and that is to explain church planting and church revitalization.

### **Planting and Revitalization**

Over these 2 years we've mostly spoken in terms of "church planting"—the idea being we would start a worship service and ministries at a new location, starting basically from scratch. It would be 3RG members who would run all the ministries and 3RG budget that would pay all the bills (beginning with a facility rental or purchase). That's church planting from scratch. No existing building. No existing congregation. Starting with nothing and trying to grow a new Gospel work.

As we've talked about church *planting*, the idea of church *revitalization* has been in the back of our minds as well, should an opportunity arise. Church revitalization is very similar to church planting, except potentially better in some significant ways. Rather than starting from scratch, church revitalization is the vision to begin working with a congregation that already exists but has been in some decline. The potential advantage here is that the congregation, however small, still has some committed members and may have property and a facility that would be hard to come by otherwise.

This is Mike McKinley's story, which he shared some with us, and that he shares quite a bit about in his book on church planting (which is more a book about church revitalization). He led a small group of members from Capitol Hill Baptist Church (including Paul and Lisa Emslie, whom some of you know), and they joined up with a very small congregation at Guilford Baptist outside the D.C. area. I think there about a dozen of them all together at the beginning. Over the years they have seen much fruit.

Clifton Baptist Church in Louisville is a similar story. This was a congregation in decline—without a pastor and without much theological rudder. But they had a good sized facility in a location with many opportunities for ministry. They ended up merging



with a small reformed Baptist church (which included Tom and Diane Schreiner and Bruce and Jodi Ware) that was meeting at a Christian school at the time.

So church revitalization has some advantages in terms of having a group of folks to partner with, and having a facility to meet in.

### **North Park Baptist Church**

Late last fall we found out that the bi-vocational pastor at North Park Baptist Church was stepping away from that position. So they've been without a pastor since then. This is a sister church within our local association of Southern Baptist churches. A couple of the leaders in our Baptist association, knowing of our desire to plant in the north, encouraged North Park to speak with us. There were some good conversations, but North Park was not inclined to pursue anything with us at that time. But the conversations have continued. One of the leaders at NPBC attended our 9 Marks workshop in February, and there have been some fruitful discussions since then.

Just a week and a half ago I met again with the leaders at NPBC, and there seems to be a real openness to partnering. They have about 25 in attendance on Sundays. They have a well-maintained facility on the edge of McCandless and Allison Park (very near the target area we have discussed in the past). Their facility includes a sanctuary, education building, multi-purpose building with nice kitchen, and an ample parking lot. They love the Lord and love their church. And they want help in reaching their north hills communities for Christ.

This relationship between 3RG and NPBC has the potential of fulfilling our desire to church plant in a way that's even more effective and efficient than what we had previously envisioned. This church revitalization opportunity would serve the same purpose, but with additional benefits for both congregations.

### **Initial Step**

The leaders at NPBC have extended an invitation for me to do some preaching there this summer. This would be a way for NPBC to get to know us and for the 2 congregations to build a relationship with one another in some significant ways (for instance, joint fellowship meals and prayer gatherings).

We see great potential in this, and we see this as an opportunity to serve our sister church, NPBC, and we'd like to serve them however we can, whether this develops beyond that or

not. Last Sunday the elders and deacons met together to discuss this. Some of you probably saw us sitting down together in the back room shortly after the worship service. One tangible way that we can serve North Parkright now is by changing our Sunday morning schedule for the summer months (June, July, August). We could have our worship service at 9:30am and then our Sunday School hour at 11am.

[In the past, we've brainstormed ways to deal with the heat in the sanctuary during the summer months. It seems like each summer there's some kind of discussion about how much it would cost to put air conditioning in here. I've wondered if we would need to have some worship services in the fellowship hall if it's too hot. So an added benefit of this summer schedule would be gathering in the sanctuary earlier when it's a bit cooler, and then being in the basement or in rooms with portable AC units during the later hour.]

So there would be that added benefit for us in a summer schedule. It's also an opportunity for us to show NPBC that we care about them and are willing to make some minor adjustments to serve them.

Over the course of these 3 months we will look for ways to build relationships with the folks of NPBC, with the hopes of ongoing partnership. This is about 3RG serving NPBC and partnering with them, hoping and praying that these two congregations can end up accomplishing much more together than either could on its own.

### **Future Potential**

There's already a good dialogue going between me and the leaders at North Park, and we'll be exploring with them what our partnership could look like going forward. Please be in prayer for these discussions. Ideally, this partnership will fulfill and even exceed what we had hoped for in a church plant. It's impossible to map out every detail at this point, much of that being up to the current leaders at NPBC. But our hope is that 3RG could be instrumental in revitalizing NPBC and thus establishing a very like-minded congregation in a new area. And if God would see fit to bless this venture, we could hope in the years to come to be involved in planting and / or revitalizing other churches in the region. This all fits so well with our mission "to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world." And it would be a direct fulfillment of the plans we've been picturing and praying for over the past 2 years.

We want to be part of the centrifugal force of the Gospel, spreading to more and more places, impacting more and more lives, and that happening specifically through the spread of the local church. Let's pray that God will use us for His glory to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ throughout Western PA and beyond. And let's pray for God's continued blessing and continued guidance each step along the way.