

## **The Priority of Spiritual Renewal**

### **Rev. Bill Rutledge**

Since John Salley is away and I have the pulpit today, I'm going to take this opportunity to let you know how much I love our Pastor and what a joy it is to work alongside him at Bedford Presbyterian Church. I feel blessed to have such a good working relationship and friendship with John. Pastors and Ministers of Music don't always work that well together

In fact, some years ago there was a feud between the Pastor and the Choir Director of The Hicksville Baptist Church. It seems the first hint of trouble came when the Pastor preached on "dedicating yourselves to service" and the Choir Director chose to sing: "I Shall Not Be Moved."

Trying to believe it was a coincidence, the Pastor put the incident behind him. The next Sunday he preached on "giving." Afterwards, the choir squirmed as the director led them in the hymn: "Jesus Paid It All."

By this time, the Pastor was losing his temper. Sunday Morning attendance swelled as the tension between the two built. A large crowd showed up the next week to hear his sermon on "The Sin of Gossiping." Would you believe the Choir Director selected: "I Love to Tell the Story?"

There was no turning back now. The following Sunday the Pastor told the congregation that unless something changed, he was considering resignation. The entire church gasped when the Choir Director led them in singing: "Why Not Tonight?"

As it came to pass, the preacher did indeed resign. The next week he informed the church that it was Jesus who led him there and it was Jesus that was taking him away, after which the choir director announced the hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

I'm sure those kinds of situations do exist. That makes me all the more grateful to have a pastor like John. I hope we never take him for granted.

Last Sunday, the Way Forward Committee shared with us a vision for the future of our church – a vision based upon our need to expand our ministry to the community, to grow our membership numerically, but most importantly to bring many more people into a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. I hope that you have had a chance to read the bulletin insert from last week that explains that vision. In order to see that vision become a reality, the session has adopted nine goals, one of which I would like to address this morning.

That goal is to work toward spiritual renewal with an emphasis on personal praise, worship and prayer, with the desire to create a spiritual environment that is conducive to a greater manifestation of God's presence in the life and ministry of our church.

Most of the goals we have adopted are designed to entice people to check out our church. They deal with advertising, promotion, events and programs that will be of interest to the community. We have deemed these efforts as vital to keeping our church alive, yet we must ask ourselves this question: Will these efforts alone be enough to produce the lasting fruit we need? If all our time, effort and money lead to newcomers showing up on Sunday morning, what will they experience when they get here? Will they experience a congregation of people whose worship is real and authentic or a people who are just going through the motions? When they show up will they hear a masterful sermon, enjoy beautiful music or will they encounter the presence of a living God? I believe the goal toward spiritual renewal is the number one priority and without it, all other efforts may fall short of that desired outcome.

The church in America is in swift decline despite the fact that it is rich in resources. Never before in history has the church had the financial resources, the technology, the highly educated, creative and gifted leaders, the beautiful buildings, the glorious music that we have today. Yet, church membership continues to drop significantly. Gallup reports that church membership in America dropped below 50% for the first time in their eight-decade history.

This decline is primarily due to the fact that the church has ceased being connected to Christ. Many churches have become more dependent on programs, strategies, skills and resources than on the Spirit of God. The church needs to remember that we can do nothing apart from an intimate relationship with Christ. That brings us to our scripture passage for this morning:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:1, 4-5

While the church in America is generally bearing little fruit, that doesn't have to be true of Bedford Presbyterian Church, as long as we will make the choice to stay connected to the source of all spiritual power and blessing. Very briefly I would like to share with you three ways that we can abide in Christ and allow His Spirit to transform us, our church and the community around us. Before I do, though, I want you to know that I am preaching first and foremost to myself. In addition, I want to stress that we have a responsibility as individual members to stay connected to Christ, yet on the corporate level, church leadership—Pastors, staff and session, determines whether or not the church as a body is constantly connecting with Him.

## **PRAYER**

The first way that we connect with the Lord is through prayer. In order to stay connected to Christ we must be a people of prayer. We must pray individually and corporately. We must

pray at church, at home, at work, in our cars, anywhere, everywhere and at all times. We must get away regularly, just as Jesus did, to seek the Lord on behalf of our families, our church and our community.

The way we pray is important. There are lots of people with serious health issues. They need our prayers and encouragement, but we should also be spending much of our prayer time focusing on Kingdom priorities such as the salvation of lost people, the spiritual condition of our nation, our schools, our children and the work of our missionaries around the world.

Every Sunday we pray the Lord's Prayer which, if we look at this prayer closely, we see that it focuses as much on furthering God's kingdom as it does on meeting our daily needs. We must learn to pray strategically and specifically against demonic strongholds that are entrenched in our communities and nation in order that we might see real spiritual breakthroughs. Jesus taught us to pray for His kingdom rule upon the earth. He taught us this so that we would know it is His desire to rule in every heart and every situation. He taught us this so that we would know that we have the authority to pray for His kingdom rule and so that we might have the faith to believe that our prayers really do have the power to change the world.

### **THE WORD**

The second way we can stay connected to Christ is by staying in His word. To me, reading and meditating on God's word is another form of prayer because prayer is not just talking. It is also listening intently to what God wants to say to us. God's desire is for us to know Him. Jeremiah 9:23-24 tells us:

Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast, boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.

God has given us His word so that we might know Him, so that we might learn to hear His voice and so that we might know how to live. It's important that His word is a part of our everyday lives.

Some people say, "Well, you know, I really don't have time to read long Bible passages." To them I might suggest that the Holy Spirit is equally able to speak when we meditate on short passages of scripture. For example, I am currently using a Once-A-Day Devotional entitled Praying through the Bible by Tyndale House Publishers. Each devotional contains a list of scriptures for reading through the Bible, but each day also includes a focus on a key passage that is great for meditation or scripture memory. The devotional ends with a prayer that is a perfect starting point for your own daily prayer time.

### **WORSHIP**

The third way that we stay connected to Christ is through Worship. When I say "worship," I'm not necessarily talking about one hour on Sunday morning. We don't switch into

worship mode at 10:00 on Sunday morning and switch it off at 11. Worship doesn't naturally flow on Sunday morning unless we are worshipping constantly during the week. If our worship on Sunday morning is to be real and authentic, we must begin to develop a lifestyle of worship. Worship so that worship becomes a part of our everyday lives.

There are three elements that make up worship. The first and foremost element is submission. When we worship, we are acknowledging that God is Lord of our lives and that we lay down our lives in full submission to Him. The second element is praise and the third is thanksgiving. Psalm 100 says:

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.

Praise and thanksgiving are the doors into God's presence. When we make the choice to offer up a sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise, we invite His presence into our lives and into whatever place or situation we find ourselves.

Several years ago I read a book about worship by Pastor Jack Hayford. In the book, Pastor Hayford shares an experience he had early in his ministry at Church On the Way in Van Nuys, California. From the start of his ministry he made certain that the church devoted much of its worship service to praise and thanksgiving. He taught his congregation the importance of praise and encouraged them to make praise and thanksgiving part of their daily lives, as well as their corporate worship.

One weekday, while at the church, Pastor Hayford walked into the sanctuary where he observed an unusual sight. The sanctuary seemed to be filled with a fine mist or cloud. Thinking there might be a problem with the church's air-conditioning system, he walked into the corridor and also into other rooms in the building, but there was no evidence of the mist in any other part of the building. He returned to the sanctuary where the mist continued to pervade the atmosphere. As he stood in the room watching the sight, the only thing he could think of was 2 Chronicles 5:12-14 which reads:

All the Levites who were musicians stood on the east side of the altar, dressed in fine linen and playing cymbals, harps and lyres. They were accompanied by 120 priests sounding trumpets. The trumpeters and musicians joined in unison to give praise and thanks to the Lord. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, the singers raised their voices in praise to the Lord and sang: "He is good; his love endures forever." Then the temple of the Lord was filled with the cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple of God.

“Could what I’m seeing be a manifestation of the presence of the Lord,” thought the pastor. Who can really know? Perhaps time will tell. And time did tell. The following Sunday there was a dramatic increase in worship attendance and by the second week, attendance had doubled. From that day on the church began to experience an explosion of growth, both spiritually and numerically.

Could something this dramatic happen at Bedford Presbyterian Church? Maybe it would—maybe it wouldn’t. The point of the story is to suggest that if our lives are centered in prayer, God’s word and worship, offering the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, submitting our lives to the Holy Spirit, His presence will draw people to Himself. If we are to survive as a church we must remain connected to Christ.

Over the next few months we will need to work, pray, plan, strategize, be creative and do whatever it takes to reach more people, but we must always keep in mind that ultimately it will be the Spirit of God that will draw people into our fellowship and into His kingdom. As the Lord said to Zerrubabel who faced the daunting task of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts.”

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Acts, Peter and John were on their way to the temple to pray when they encountered a lame man by the roadside begging for money. The scriptures say that Peter looked intently at the man and said, “Look at us!” The man fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. Peter then said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

Brothers and sisters, in the days ahead, because of the decisions we are making now, we are going to be shouting to a broken world, “Look at us!” When we do, some may fix their attention on us, expecting to receive something. At that point, what will we give them? Will we give them a loaf of bread, a nice sermon, a beautiful song or will we give them something miraculous and life-changing. I hope it will be the latter and it can be as long as we stay connected to the source of all power and blessing—Jesus Christ.