

THE FOUR PILLARS OF HARVEST BIBLE CHAPEL

After much prayer and seeking God, the founding elders of Harvest Bible Chapel identified the following four pillars, which we believe to be the foundational essentials of a church that God blesses. The Lord has done incredible things in our midst as we have focused on these pillars.

James MacDonald, Founding and Senior Pastor of Harvest Bible Chapel, wrote the following explication on the four pillars in 1998.

PILLAR 1:

PREACHING THE AUTHORITY OF GOD'S WORD WITHOUT APOLOGY

Preaching has fallen on hard times. The seeker movement often jettisons the Word of God in favor of talk that "influences" people to Christ, using what Paul called "the persuasive words of man's wisdom" (1 Corinthians 2:4). At the same time, the worship movement often relegates the proclamation of God's Word to "whatever time is left." Some seem to ask, "Why hear about God when you can experience Him?" as though God is experienced more when we speak to Him than when He speaks to us.

The "thus saith the Lord" proclamation of God's Word is very difficult to find on a given Sunday morning. Oh, there are lots of people talking about God, parsing the text of Scripture, even dispensing Bible information, but who can find anointed, passionate preaching? Where can we find preaching from one who has been gripped by the Spirit and the Word, one who brings the message with power and authority? Where is preaching that grips hearers' souls with the conviction of the Holy Spirit? I am not concerned with those of us who aim for this and often fall short, but with those who are missing the mark and don't even know it, those who have reduced the biblical content of their messages and are "healing my people slightly, saying peace peace when there is no peace," (Jeremiah 6:14) rather than "this is the way; walk in it" (Isaiah 30:21).

Without this kind of preaching in our worship we simply experience God the way we want Him to be. We write the songs, we include the parts about Him that we like, and we avoid the rest. Without careful exposition of the whole counsel of God, alongside our singing to God, we are in danger of worshiping a god that we have "made with our own hands" (Isaiah 2:8). Repeatedly in the gospels the people's response to Jesus' teaching was amazement at the authority with which He taught. He didn't couch his teaching with biblical explanations to gain their respect. He didn't bury the truth beneath both sides of the argument and discuss multiple interpretations. He didn't equivocate the hard edge of truth with endless meandering to avoid misunderstanding. Above all, He did not try to make the people comfortable or chase after those who walked away. He even acknowledged the difficulty of acceptance by the people: "this is a hard saying who can accept it" (John 6:60, 66). Psalm 138:2 tells us that God has "exalted His word above His name." We believe that God is looking for houses of worship where people can hear His voice. People all around us are grasping for answers. They are tired of churches that dilute the truth, that thin the language of sin and redemption to gain a hearing. People are looking for a place where equivocation is out and absolute truth is in. At Harvest Bible, we have tried from the start to be that kind of church. Though we have much to learn about what it means to bring a biblical message of authority and urgency, to really "speak for God," that is one of the pillars upon which we are based, and that is our earnest, prayerful desire.

PILLAR 2:

LIFTING HIGH THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST IN WORSHIP

Is it possible that our worship is getting too emotional? Does our worship need a larger infusion of truth to keep it balanced? Remember the Samaritan woman in John 4:22 who was chastised by Jesus for worshipping in ignorance? "You worship what you do not know," He said. When emotion becomes the engine leading our worship instead of the caboose following biblical truth, the train will go quickly off the tracks. When emotion becomes the master, dictating what is true instead of servant participation in what is true, false doctrine cannot be far away. On the other hand, truth without spirit is also defective worship. My wife does not want to be told I love her because it is time to say it again, and God is not impressed with the cold recitations of robotic worshipers mouthing words because it's 11 a.m. on Sunday morning. God says, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me," (Isaiah 29:13). Most of us who grew up in evangelical churches remember what I would call "truth worship," hymns filled with wonderful theology and truth about God. The problem was that truth raced by so quickly there was often no time for it to sink down into our spirits. Worship made it to our heads but not often to our hearts. After a five verse rendition of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," one could only remark, "Wow, that was really true!" That kind of head worship without the heart, truth worship without the spirit entering in, is what Jesus condemned in John 4:24. "God is spirit and those who worship must worship in spirit and in truth."

Why does it seem that so many churches have opted for "truth" or "spirit" worship? Is it because the balance is so difficult to find? We have tried to be very forthright in this by telling newcomers that if they come from a "truth worship experience," they should understand that people are free to clap or raise their hands and that extended times of worship are the norm for us. We let them know that they must not resent the presence of emotion in our worship but learn to "enter in." At the same time we instruct newcomers from a "spirit worship" background that exuberant dancing about or waving of arms should be restricted to their personal times with the Lord so as not to be the cause of someone's attention turning from Jesus to them. We believe that God has honored the balance of truth and spirit, in our worship. What a joy it has been to see "intellectual Christians" experience their worship rather than just understanding it and equally thrilling to see "spirit worshipers" free themselves from the mid-week let down of seeing church as an emotional fix. Twenty years ago, most churches were either truth or spirit oriented.

Today I believe that God is doing the greatest and deepest works in churches that are seeking a balance. We have struggled for that and certainly have erred on both sides at times, but we believe the balance between spirit and truth is the key to being the kind of worshiper God is seeking (John 4:23).

PILLAR 3:

BELIEVING FIRMLY IN THE POWER OF PRAYER

As you read the gospels, do you notice that there are many things Jesus did not teach His disciples to do? As far as we know Jesus did not teach His disciples to preach or teach. He did not teach them how to heal nor did He teach them how to organize and administer a large organization. He did not teach them how to win friends and influence people. He did not even teach them how to lead, except by example. What Jesus did teach His disciples was how to pray! The gospels record that one day the disciples simply sat and watched Jesus pray. Whether it was the fervency of His prayer or the length or content of His prayer we do not know: Obviously, the disciples were moved and inspired because "when He ceased, one of them said unto Him, 'Lord, teach us to pray' " (Luke 11:1). Jesus prayed before His ministry began, before meals, before a big decision and before an important day. He prayed during acts of service, times of relational pressure, in sorrow and in the midst of temptation.

Jesus prayed after a stressful day, after a spiritual victory, after a provision of God and after completing a job that God had given Him to do. Can we afford to do less? Whatever you believe about the book of Acts, it is certainly clear that the early church was a supernatural church. There were no seminars on "if you do A plus B you will get C." We believe that God's kind of church is a supernatural church—a place where things are happening that are not humanly explainable. I am not talking about bizarre unbiblical manifestations, just dramatic conversions, physical and emotional healing, and direct specific answers to prayer. You know, real miracles. Many times my mind is saying "I can't do it with out Him," yet my day planner indicates that I am trying to go it alone. Only when I get on my knees and get desperate for God does my true need for Him become more than intellectual assent.

For the last 10 years the most consistent barometer of God's blessing upon our fellowship has been our willingness to "pray the price." By that we do not mean God does the work we desire when a certain amount of prayer has been prayed, only that God does His deepest works when people are spiritually fit to receive them. Prayer is preparation for that work. I could take time to recount the miraculous answers to prayer that have come and how they have powerfully enriched our church and kindled the fires of prayer, but after 10 years I am convinced we still have so far to go in this matter of prayer. Nowhere does Satan attack the Church more than when it begins to pray. Early morning prayer meetings, all night prayer meetings, small group prayer, 24-hour prayer vigils, weeks of prayer, months of prayer—all of this we have done and increasingly must do because we believe firmly in the power of prayer.

PILLAR 4

SHARING THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST WITH BOLDNESS

All the emphasis on church growth troubles me. Our church has certainly grown, and I am not opposed to large churches. However, the desire by pastors to have large churches, the endless counting and analyzing of church attendance and what C.S. Lewis called "posing and posturing and look at me and aren't I a good boy," is doing more harm than good. Though it began with a good goal, the church growth movement has compromised both the message of the gospel and the biblical method for it's propagation. The focus on human persuasion in evangelism has produced an array of church growth methods that could be accurately sub-titled "how to fill your church with tares." The early church appears to have placed no emphasis on evangelistic methodology. Their approach was simple and powerful, they were BOLD! Many times in the New Testament the Greek word translated boldness which literally means "openness" or "candor," to speak freely especially in the face of hostility. It does not imply using a loud voice or an obnoxious presentation of spiritual truth that disregards the willingness of the listener. Boldness is the Spirit-directed conviction that one must share the good news of Jesus Christ and not fear the response or reproach of the listener. Spirit-led boldness has been replaced in our day by "the fear of man which brings a snare" (Proverbs 29:25).

Who are we to think that we can share the gospel in a way that makes people comfortable, when Stephen, James, Paul—even Jesus Christ himself—were beaten, ridiculed and ultimately killed for boldly proclaiming the truth. Modern proponents of the "subtle gospel" must consider Peter a fool for saying, "we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:13). Would to God that the unsaved in our day could see our boldness and marvel realizing that we have "been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). It's all right there in Acts 4. As we rely upon God for supernatural boldness, some respond and receive Christ. Others become very angry and reject or even attack us; then we continue in prayer for boldness. Is not the easy way, but it is God's way. Our fear of man is understandable—even Paul asked for prayer, "that I may speak boldly as I ought to speak" (Ephesians 6:20)—but it is not acceptable. Our problem is that we want to talk about Jesus and remain popular with those who reject Him. We want the approval of our hearers more than the approval of God (see Galatians 1:10). We have opted for a sociological approach to sharing the gospel rather than a supernatural one.

For almost 10 years now, we have challenged our people to be bold witnesses for Jesus Christ, to "go out into the highways and compel them to come in." We have not always reached those we wanted to reach, but we have discovered there are people all around us whom God has ripened to the gospel through the painful circumstances of life.

Through this witness God has been faithful and provided a miraculous harvest of souls. Though some Christians are more gifted in evangelism than others, all believers are called to be bold witnesses for Jesus. Boldness is not something we can work up ourselves, but it is something the Lord will give to those who persistently ask. "The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion" (Proverbs 28:1).

The bottom line is this: the Church should be a place where God is clearly at work. In and around all the variety He allows, these foundational essentials invite and allow Him to make His power and glory known, instead of merely displaying the ingenuity of those in ministry. Is God making His power known where you worship? In truly biblical ways? I pray that He is.

Though we desire to do even more to make our church a place where God is at work, we believe strongly that God will bless a church that preaches His Word without apology, continues in prayer, shares the gospel with boldness and exalts the name of Jesus through biblical worship.

May the Spirit of our Lord assist our meditation on these things so that we may all know how to conduct ourselves in the Church of our living God, which is "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15).