

Healthy church 6: Bible teaching and prayer

Introduction

We're currently considering the Bible's vision for a healthy local church: what it is that the Lord wants Immanuel to be and to become. Thus far we've seen that:

1. The church is the "gathering" together of God's people.
2. The local church reveals the glory of the Gospel in its relationships, as diverse people are made one in Christ Jesus.
3. Each local church has a responsibility to partner with other churches – locally, regionally, and globally. And denominations are a wise way of pursuing accountability and encouragement.
4. Every member of the local church is to be committed to the spiritual growth of the church and other members.
5. Biblical manhood and womanhood: God has made men and women equal but different. And embracing who God has made us – either as men or as women – will be critical to the church's ability to reveal the supernatural power of God in our relationships.

Today, we're considering the place of Bible teaching and prayer within the life of our congregation. Here's the headline: these are the Lord's normal means of grace for achieving his extraordinary work of building the church. (When we talk about "means of grace" we're using a term which simply means those God-appointed tools through which God chooses to work in supernatural power.)

1. Bible teaching

(a) God's Word is powerful

Here is a chief conviction for any healthy church: God's Word is powerful – He uses it to bring the dead to life... and the Christian to maturity

We read in John 5:24, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears **my word** and believes him who sent me has eternal life. he does not come into judgement, but has passed **from death to life.**" *John 5:24*

We're reminded that outside of union with Christ ALL HUMANITY is DEAD. We shouldn't be deceived by people who appear physically to be full of life or who even seem to be full of goodness. Outside of Christ we are all spiritually dead.

"Life" means knowing God, through the Lord Jesus Christ. We enjoy this relationship now by faith. Because of Christ we will be safe on the judgement day, looking forward to seeing Christ face to face. Our great desire at Immanuel is for people to be brought from death to life.

Dead people cannot save themselves. We cannot generate spiritual life – either in ourselves or in others. But God has provided a means: Jesus teaches us in John 5:24 that, as people hear Jesus' words (not just in the Gospels but in the whole Bible, which is breathed out by His Spirit) and believe them, they cross from death to life.

On our own we do not possess the ability to exercise saving faith. Without God's gift of faith, no-one would believe. But, wonderfully, God works through His word to impart that gift of faith. As the apostle Paul puts it in Romans 10:17, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." If we want people to believe, we encourage them to sit under the teaching of the Bible.

And God's Word isn't just powerful to move someone from death to life. The Word of God brings the Christian to maturity.

A really helpful verse summarising the power of God's word to mature the Christian (and our priority as a result) is Colossians 1:28, "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ."

The maturity of which Paul speaks means living *increasingly* with Christ as Lord... trusting Him more... loving and serving Him increasingly wholeheartedly... being conformed to His likeness. This is a process which God will complete in us only in the new creation. But even now He is working at maturing us – and calls us to play our part.

You can imagine a line or a spectrum. There is a great chasm in the middle – death on one side, and life on the other. And lined up in that section marked "life" is every single Christian. God's desire – and our urgent priority – is that we move along that line towards "maturity."

If we care for the lost *and* for one another we'll want to make much of the Bible – not just in our personal lives and families, but in our church (remember: we're currently focusing on growing a healthy church). There is power in this word of God. It is the sword of the Spirit, enabling us to fight against sin, the world and the devil (like "Christian" in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, fighting against his foes with his heavenly sword). It is like a divine "mirror" (as Bunyan also puts it): as we look into it, the Spirit enables us truly to see ourselves (variously, as sinners and sinners and sufferers) and to meet with God and to gaze upon our saviour.

But in the growth of the healthy church, it's not just "bible teaching" in general for which we must be concerned, but the *preaching* of God's word.

(b) The preaching of the Bible is central to the life of the church

Preaching – by which we mean monologue communication – is highly unfashionable! We're told to avoid it, because people nowadays have short attention spans. And because it's a mode of communication that seems rather old fashioned and even authoritarian ("someone standing up and telling me what to do? Can't we have a discussion instead?")!

But Bible PREACHING is central to the life of a healthy local church. Of course, Scripture does give us other forms of Bible communication (all of which ought to be present in the life of the local church: dialogue, small group ministry, one-to-one discipling relationships). But preaching is central and indispensable.

We can see that illustrated in many different ways within Scripture, for example in the great GATHERINGS of the church in the Bible. At Mount Sinai God's rescued people gather to worship, and at the heart of their "churching" the Lord opens his mouth to speak (Exodus 19-20). And at the great post-exilic gathering in Jerusalem (see Nehemiah 8) Ezra reads the Law of the Lord from early until midday, and the Levites help the people to understand what it means.

And Scripture also helps to explain *why* monologue preaching is a fitting means of communication from God, especially at the centre of gathered worship. Consider what kind of message the gospel – and the whole Bible – actually is. It is many things, of course. But it is not less than an imperial announcement, rather like that given by an ancient herald following a change of king. A herald *wouldn't* say to a city, "Let's have a group discussion about the new regime." He would declare and announce it: "There is a new Lord and king." Similarly, the Gospel announces a new regime: "Christ is Lord. Repent and believe." It's a statement of amazing love (this is a king who saves and who sovereignly enables hard hearts to welcome his kingship), but it is also a statement of authority from God the King.

The church is the community of saved people, which has been created by the powerful word of God, whose members together gladly submit to that authority. And we express this no better than when we sit together under the preached word of God.

But what kind of Bible preaching ought we to submit ourselves to?

(c) Expository preaching should be the norm

What is expository or expositional preaching? On this point we're helped by the words and example of Charles Simeon. He died in 1836 having served 53 years as pastor of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge. He was a great advocate and practitioner of the expository sermon.

Simeon writes: "My endeavour is to bring out of Scripture what is there, and not to thrust in what I think might be there. I have a great jealousy on this head; never to speak more or less than I believe to be the mind of the Spirit in the passage I am expounding." (Cited in David Helm, *Expositional preaching: how we speak God's word today*, page 12).

David Helm comments: "Simeon viewed the preacher as duty-bound to the text. He was committed to staying on the line, never rising above the text of Scripture to say more than it said and never falling beneath the text by lessening its force or fullness... Expositional preaching is empowered preaching that rightfully submits the shape and emphasis of the sermon to the shape and emphasis of a biblical text." (Helm, *Expositional preaching*, pages 12-13).

Or to put it another way: every passage of Scripture has a God-given "burden" or "big point". The sermon's "burden" must be exactly the same.

Here's a test for a preacher: a mature Christian ought be able to discern the sermon's "burden" (a test of *clarity*) and easily relate that main point and the sermon's headings to the Bible passage (a test of *faithfulness* – "I can see where you got that from! I could almost do that myself!")

What are the advantages of expository preaching? First, it respects way God has ordered Bible. He has given us Bible books, not a systematic theology or topical book. When we work our way sequentially through Bible books, looking to "expose" the distinctive voice of every passage, we allow God to set the agenda and ourselves to hear His voice most clearly – including those shocks and surprises which otherwise we would have missed.

Second, it preserves the congregation from the hobby horses or personal obsessions of a preacher! Here at Immanuel we do have systematic/topical teaching. And it is NECESSARY, to bring clarity of understanding and application to God's people. Often we cover doctrinal matters in the adult Sunday School. Occasionally in church (perhaps twice a year) we'll have short systematic or topical preaching series). But out of 52 Sunday morning sermons probably 46 will form part of sequential expository preaching series.

Third, it subjects our lives/needs/concerns to Scripture, for *God's* healing and perspective. Often we come to church on Sunday heavy laden, and longing for God to directly address the matter which is gripping our heart and mind. Perhaps in God's amazing providence we do find His word that day speaks directly to that concern. But, more often than not, gathered worship – with a Biblical exposition at its heart – will *not* speak directly to my issue in an immediate sense. Nevertheless, we find that we have met God, been refreshed by the Gospel, and been granted a new perspective which is desperately needed, but which we wouldn't have chosen for ourselves.

Fourth, over a period of time, clear expository preaching (ideally coupled with a bit of explanation – either during a sermon or elsewhere) teaches the congregation how to study Bible for themselves. We are each meant to be "self-feeders" as well as listening *together* to the word of God. And it's *possible* to learn to "self-feed" on the Bible: it's not a book with a magic key possessed only by a few!

Fifthly, Biblical exposition does the “heavy lifting” of building up a church, as David Helm puts it. This is a huge joy and relief for the pastors and elders of a church. God has appointed this means of slow-but-deep growth. Over the years, through Biblical expositions and faithful obedience, God will grow a healthy church.

And so, at Immanuel we’ll want to...

(d) Allow God’s word to work in the life of our congregation

There are some ways in which we can do this individually: read the passage in advance, pray for the preacher, pray for your own understanding and obedience (and that of others), listen attentively and take notes.

But there is a *corporate* dimension to receiving God’s word which is critical: make sure that you talk about the sermon you’ve heard preached – after church (don’t talk about the football!), over lunch, at fellowship group, over a coffee in discipling relationships, in families. Try to pick just ONE thing to talk and pray about. Do your best to make the most of the feast which God gives us from His word every week.

And, lastly, look to grow in discernment and a concern for truth. Be like the Bereans (in Acts 17), who tested Paul’s words against the text of Scripture. Ask questions, don’t let puzzles go un-answered, don’t be surprised if you hear error spoken against from the pulpit. And if you think that you *hear* error from the pulpit... then do something about it: if I start preaching any other Gospel encourage the elders to dismiss me.

2. Prayer

All Christians understand that prayer is important. But when we think about prayer we’ll almost certainly think about *private* prayer.

The Bible has much to say about CORPORATE prayer – and here we’re going to consider praying together with other Christians...

(a) The importance of corporate prayer

Consider the Lord’s Prayer, in Matthew 6: “OUR Father... give US... forgive US OUR debts as WE forgive OUR debtors... Lead US not... but deliver US.” It’s a pattern for corporate prayer.

Why is it important? Some reasons...

(b) God uses corporate prayer to advance his kingdom.

This is a glorious truth that we know from Scripture and see worked out in church history. When God’s people join in prayer, he likes to respond. For example...

Acts 4:31, “And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.”

Also...

(c) Corporate prayer creates unity

(Here I’m grateful to material from the CHBC Core Seminar on “Teaching and Prayer.”)

When we pray *together* we are seeking to leave behind our own selfish desires in order to focus on God and on others.

Thus, at church prayer meetings we pray for each other in various ways: we thank God for His grace in people’s lives; we pray for others’ physical and mental health; we pray for their spiritual well-being; and we pray for their ministries, etc.

Both praying for others, and hearing others pray for us, naturally draws us closer together...

- as we learn more about each other and,
- as we feel the effect of those prayers as He answers them in the work done by the Holy Spirit.

Here, then, is one specific idea for how we can support that unity: are there prayer requests or testimonies of God's grace that you could share with the congregation at the church prayer meeting? Are there requests or testimonies that could draw us together and help us as a body to marvel at the power and mercy of our God? And when corporate prayer is offered for you and your needs you could actually think of it as a service to the whole congregation!

For some of us, that might feel a bit strange. We're private people (too private, perhaps?) who think of others praying for us as a burden or an intrusion. But that's not at all how the Bible views it. There's a great passage in 2 Corinthians 1 where Paul is sharing about a particularly difficult situation.

2 Corinthians 1:8-11, "For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. ⁹ Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. ¹⁰ He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. ¹¹ You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many."

That last verse is right on point: "*so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.*" Was it a burden on these believers to pray for Paul? Absolutely not. It was a blessing to lift him up and share in the joy of God's continual deliverance of him. What if Paul had decided that his problems weren't worth bothering the church with? We should thank God that he did not.

So, think about how you can share your needs with others so that we may be drawn together as brethren and encouraged by God's amazing work as he answers prayers and meets needs.

Are you struggling in your faith? Are you struggling at work? Are you struggling in your marriage? Are you struggling with evangelism? It's so good to share struggles, and for the church to rally around one another in prayer, and then to praise God together as our prayers are answered. Allow others to bring you before our Lord in prayer—it is a privilege for them.

(d) Corporate prayer teaches us how to pray

You can read books about learning to pray. But the best way to learn is by praying with other and older Christians.

This is another wonderful reason to be at the church prayer meeting: we can learn from others.

And pay attention to the prayer we offer throughout gathered worship each Sunday. The shape of gathered worship follows the shape of the Gospel itself, and prompts us to pray publicly at different points in the service.

- With a God-centred Scripture before us we begin in praise and adoration;
- Reminded of God's Law and our sinful failure to conform with God's law we pray in confession;
- We remind ourselves of the Gospel, give thanks for Christ's work on the Cross, and pray not only for forgiveness, but also for the assurance of sins forgiven;
- Having received forgiveness we pray for various needs (sometimes called supplication – or "asking prayer" – often in response to our weekly Psalm reading)
- We listen to God's Word read and preached, and then respond in prayer to God's Word: asking Him to accomplish His word within us, and to send us out as joyful and obedient disciples.

This is how we pray in gathered worship. And we can pray like this ourselves – on our own, and together with others.

(e) Praying for our church

Lastly, some practical tips to encourage our praying:

1. Pray for the preacher.

Think of Paul writing to the Ephesians: “Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.” (Eph 6:19-20).

If the great apostle Paul needed prayer to speak, certainly our preachers do.

2. Pray through the list of Immanuel people.

This is essential and central to the health of our church. Roughly four times a year we update the list of Immanuel people. Chiefly, this list exists as a tool for regular prayer.

Each of us needs to be praying through that list. As we do so we can work for the spiritual health of a brother or sister, even if we don't know them. And as we do so we'll be working for the good of the church as a whole.

3. Be at the church prayer meeting.

Once a month we call our people together to pray. It's such an encouraging evening. I love being together at the prayer meeting!

4. Lastly: pray for our church as a whole.

Our church has a culture – this is the habits, expectations, and behaviors that come to characterize us as a church.

Pray big Bible prayers for our church, that our culture would be transformed by God's Word and Spirit. For example, pray that we would have real unity in diversity (remember Ephesians). Pray that our relationships would become more transparent, that hospitality would grow among us.

Perhaps take whatever you're reading currently in the Bible and turn it into “big prayers” for the congregation and its corporate culture.

The Lord loves to work in response to such prayers!