

On These We Stand

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About every year or so, maybe at the very most two years, I preach a sermon like I'm going to preach today, something of a call of recommitment to what we're about and, by the way, it really doesn't matter what we're about, we're to be about what God says we're to be about because it's not our church, it's his church, amen? So I know I'm preaching to the choir with a lot of these truths but as you hear things that are things we've been saying for 25 or so years, amen it in your heart and recommit yourself to these truths. For some of you that may not have been around as long, there may be some new things or some new ways to look at things and some recommitments in your hearts that you need to make. I spent quite a few more hours on this sermon than I normally do even for a Sunday morning sermon and to give you hope, I cut some of it out. I've entitled it, "On These We Stand." There are some irreducible minimums of true faithful church life, things we believe and the ways we function and these we stand on and I have committed to you and I think we've modeled this, it doesn't matter to me if they work or not, it doesn't matter to me if we are successful or not in the world's eyes, on these we stand.

Matthew 16:18 and all of this should be on your screen, by the way, but Matthew 16:18 says, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it." Ephesians 3:21 says, "to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen." I was wonderfully converted to faith in Christ sometime in February 1979. You say, "Pastor, you don't know when it was?" Look, I didn't know what happened. I was in my car, somebody told me later I was saved and I thought, "What does that mean?" That's how ignorant I was. I do remember it was close to my 19th birthday and my birthday is Groundhog's Day, February 2. I was driving my car on a Sunday night headed back to college listening to the radio and I was really discouraged that night and I was listening to the radio and a Presbyterian preacher came on because this station featured religious broadcasting on Sunday evenings and I remember listening to him and truly I was apprehended by God. I did not leave Lawrenceburg, Tennessee heading for Murfreesboro, Tennessee where Middle Tennessee State University was with any thought of God at all. I wasn't thinking, "I think I'll start reading my Bible or I want to listen to some preaching." I was just driving, just knowing that in my heart I was a miserable young man. Now, most people looking at me on the outside would have thought that I was doing real well because I put on a good façade but I was so empty on the inside.

God saved me that night and overwhelmed my life. My love for him exploded. My joy in his word grew greatly. The next fall I transferred down here to the university of north Alabama because some Christian friends from high school were going to school here and they told me, they said, "Jeff, you need some Christian roommates," and if you knew my old roommates, you would have said, "Yeah, you need some Christian roommates." I certainly did. We began looking for a church home and drove across the river and found this church; it was called First Baptist Church in those days, maybe 100, 125 strong in the old auditorium building over there which was just one metal building, thus the name Warehouse Baptist that we used to be called, and the pews went about halfway back but I remember sitting there and learning to appreciate and enjoy it. I didn't like it at first, that tells you something. I didn't like it at first but I learned to enjoy and appreciate expositional preaching. Verse by verse, chapter by chapter, Dr. Bob Pittman preached the word of God. I was only here a little while, I don't remember the chronological order exactly but a few months and then the pastor asked me if I would come on as the youth pastor and I did that.

I had been converted about a year or so and I was already beginning to be deeply troubled by what I was seeing in churches. I was taught by the churches I had been visiting and attending, some up in Tennessee, some in Alabama, that the Bible is emphatically God's inerrant word. Now, that was something I strongly denied before my conversion. I had a person remind me that I was in high school and I would debate publicly that the Bible was not trustworthy and was not the word of God. But Baptist people began to teach me that, that it was the final authority for all faith and practice and you know how it works, the Spirit of God now lived in me and the Spirit within me was giving a strong affirmation to that truth. But many of those who taught me that began to, in effect, teach me that although the Bible was the only and final authority, that there were some parts of the Bible that we've learned to ignore and that I needed to, in effect, fall in line and learn those parts. It was something like rules of grammar. I never learned well the rules of grammar because I kept remembering they would say here are the rules, now here are the exceptions; every rule had a number of exceptions. It was as if I was being taught, yes, the Bible is the guideline, the foundation for faith and practice but there are some parts of it just through the generations we've learned to ignore.

I remember as a new believer and as a young man just starting in ministry how deeply in love I fell with the word of God. You've got to understand something, I didn't grow up in church. I came from a quasi-agnostic background and all of this is brand-new to me and I realized what a gift that was because to begin my ministry I had nothing to unlearn. I was just as much of a blank slate as you could be, just had my Bible. I was just certain that if I used the Scriptures in my ministry and was determined to go by just what the Bible teaches for life in ministry, that the churches would really be encouraged by that and would really support me in that. Man, was I wrong. I mean, from the very beginning, I started getting into trouble with church folks and have been in trouble with church folks ever since.

Now, I'm going to move forward probably eight years. I had just become the senior pastor here and we were beginning to make some pretty significant changes in some

things and I got a call from a man by the name of Mark Dever. I did not know who Mark Dever was but he said he had heard about our ministry here and he would like to sit down and talk with me. He said he was going to be lecturing at the Beeson Divinity School on the campus of Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama and would I drive down there and have a meal with him and talk about church stuff because he was convicted of reforming the church he had just begun pastoring the way we were convicted and I thought, "Well, that's encouraging." So we met and talked for a little while and I'll never forget this, he looked at me and he said, "Jeff, you know, if my church is at 6 a.m. in reforming us back to biblical health, you guys at Muscle Shoals are already at 12 noon." I remember I was kind of surprised at that and I thought, "Isn't everybody doing what we are doing? Isn't this a track we're all on?" Mark has since used us as an example in one of his books on Baptist churches and about Baptist history.

I would guesstimate coming forward about three years later, we were contacted by Jerry Rankin, the president of the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and he had learned that we had put in place a new approach to missions. We called it a personalized strategic approach to missions whereby the local church assumes ownership for missions and then uses missions boards as our channel to express our commitment to world missions. It had become inverted, you know. We had become an institutionalized approach before that where typically a church threw money at the mission board and felt like, "Well, we're doing our missions job." Well, Dr. Rankin was enthused with our commitment to missions and he one year during our missions conference flew 64 missions leaders, Baptist missions leaders from all over the country to here, Muscle Shoals, Alabama, to watch our missions conference to see it and observe what we were doing and after that they began to use our church as a model to encourage the other 40,000 Southern Baptist churches to consider changing their approach to world missions and God opened up a lot of doors for us; I was in a lot of meetings and the Lord was using us in ways that I had never dreamed possible.

It wasn't probably five or six years ago we got a call here at Grace Life Church from the International Mission Board about our work in Peru. We had been going up to the mountains, the Andes Mountains and preaching to an unreached people group. Now, if that's a new term to you, unreached people means there is nobody within their culture who is a Christian so if everybody in the culture told one another everything they knew about Jesus, no one would know about Jesus meaning the Gospel is not there; the Bible is not there. It's not there, so this is a largely unreached people group and Brother Steve had a lot to do with that and we started sending guys up there but anyway, after a period of time, several were converted and a church was constituted. But anyway, the mission board called us and said, "We want you to know we've done some research and as far as we can tell, the church that you guys planted among the Hakaru in Peru is the first church planted among an unreached people group by a local church in America without the aid of a career missionary." And I was just amazed, I thought, "You're kidding me." I thought that had happened probably many times so I wasn't even thinking about those kinds of things.

As God was beginning to bless some of the things and here's what you probably don't remember, when we made a lot of these first changes, we caught a lot of flack about it. A lot of opposition. A lot of people were decrying that we were moving away from the Baptist way of doing things, but I think what God was beginning to show us, "If you will do what's right according to my word, give it some time, I will bless it and use it for my glory," because it's not about us being smart or wise or clever, it's about the book being the true way to do ministry for the Lord. We were just committed to Matthew 16:18 that says, "upon this rock," Jesus speaking to Peter, "I will build My church." Now, not in Peter but on the truth Peter had proclaimed that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Now, let's remind ourselves what God did not say to Peter. He did not say, "I will build your church." He did not say, "You will build my church." He said, "I will build my church." God is the builder and his church is to be built according to his dictates. We must avoid building a church and inviting God to bless it. God's church exists for God's purpose, it functions according to God's pattern and it is to be infused with God's power. Quite simply, it's his church. We are to be obedient tools in God's hand as he builds.

In every generation and I'm a student of church history, this is so true, in every generation, the church is under attack. It is attacked from without and it is attacked from within but it's the attacks from within that are by far the most damaging. From within, the church is attacked by subjective, defective viewpoints or approaches as to the church's mission and as to the church's functions. In our day, pragmatism is king of the day. It is prominent in every city today that churches have sold out to "whatever works" instead of what is right. I was told by a man who is a leader in our church that he was fellowshiping with a man who is a community leader and a member of another church in the Shoals area and this man who's a member of another church was complaining that his Sunday school teacher is known to be at the tavern gambling on Saturday night but comes in and teaches the Sunday school class on Sunday morning, and also that there were two couples in the church that had recently pretty well swapped partners and were still in the church in good standing. This is pragmatism or cowardice.

I just read a pamphlet that came across my desk just the other day and it was called "A Synergized Conference," and the idea was a lot of churches from a lot of denominations were coming together to learn how to do church work and be more effective and grow, and on that list of all the churches were several churches who according to us and our beliefs about the Scripture and Baptist history, teach out-and-out heresy like the United Pentecostal Church. Now, there are some good folks in the Pentecostal Church and I think some that know Christ but the doctrinal position of the United Pentecostal Church is that the Holy Spirit is not divine; that the Holy Spirit is not a part of the Godhead. Folks, that is unacceptable doctrinal heresy and that was one of the churches listed in this group of churches but along with this group of churches was a prominent Southern Baptist leader and I thought, "That's the day we're living in where commitment to truth is out the window because if we get together with people, even those who deny essential doctrine, we can all learn how to 'make it work better' and be more successful."

I heard this not long ago and it's one of those phrases that you hear and it just sticks with you and that's this simple phrase: truth is objective. Now, think about that: truth is

objective. In other words, it's not subjective. In other words, truth doesn't come out of you, truth is outside of you and it has to be discovered. In the church today, we must be objective about God's truth, not subjective about what we think. We must not start with what works and then find Bible verses to support it, we must start with the Bible, obey it and then trust God to bless it. Truth is objective, it's outside of us, it has to be discovered, and that's the marvelous journey of Christianity: the Spirit of God works in our hearts, we are enabled with a new capacity to receive and have confidence in the truth of the Bible and we begin letting this objective truth come into us and change us both what we think, what we feel, what we believe and how we function because truth is objective.

Well, we're coming to the end of 2011, we're thinking about a new budget year and you'll be presented with the proposed new budget next week and like I've said for about five years now, if you liked last year's budget, you'll love this one because it's about exactly the same. As a matter of fact, we're reducing the spending plan down a little bit because things are tight but that's just kind of where we are. But we are thinking about new things and a new year and I thought this is a perfect time to renew our commitment to being a true church. Now, I've received some flack about that. "Well, you think you're a true church." Well, bless God, what are you trying to be if you're not trying to be a true church? Are you trying to be a false church? I mean, it is that not what we're striving...we're not saying we've arrived at it but you ought to be striving toward it. And I think this is a good time for us as the family of God to say, "Yes, Pastor, I stand with you as we recommit ourselves to those irreducible minimums, those absolute foundations of what makes God's true church." And one day we will all die but let's all die striving to build a true church for the glory of God.

We want to be God's called out assembly, a church that is functioning God's way for the only and high purpose of God's glory. Now, to do this we must yield to "what saith the Scriptures?" Now, folks, you've just got to understand Grace Life Church, this is becoming foreign in our day. Now, there's a lot of lip service, "Oh yeah, we believe the Bible. Oh yeah, those truths are important." But to really base the church, its mission and its functions on the Bible, that's getting very scarce. As Spurgeon said in the 1830s in his pastorate in London, he said, "We're on the downgrade," and we are on the downgrade in the church today.

So I want to give you an outline of some foundational convictions, you might call them principles or even practices but I think they're irreducible minimums and what I mean by that, if these things are ignored or rejected, it's questionable if that group that ignores them or rejects them can even be called a church.

I. Bible preaching. We're going to recommit ourselves to Bible preaching. You say, "Pastor, you know we're committed to that." Yes, but you do not know how easily it can slip away. Do you know the number of great pulpits in America and in Europe, I mean great pulpits of 50, 80, 150 years ago are now blatantly God-denying, Bible-rejecting liberal pulpits. Boy, I don't want that to happen at Grace Life Church of the Shoals.

Now, when I say Bible preaching, I mean that we come together to hear the mind of God. Now, get that, we come together to hear the mind of God, never the mind of man. Now, preaching the word is a two-way street: the pulpit must be committed to teach the mind of God and the pew must be committed to hear the word of God. The true and only acceptable preaching is that which reveals the mind of God, that is, what does God think? Preaching, that is Bible preaching, is not just using the Bible in a message, we've got a lot of that going on, it is making the main point of the message the main point of the passage. Did you get that? Studying the text so that what Paul is saying or what Jesus is saying in Luke 6 that we've been in, what he's saying is our main point to our congregation, never interpolating into the text what is not there.

The sermon must give the original intent of the original author. In other words, what was he trying to say to the audience he was talking to in that day? Now, to do that, we must interpret the text grammatically; we must interpret it contextually; we must interpret it culturally and historically; and then interpret it systematically; and lastly, spiritually and that will give us an understanding. For example, when you get to Luke 6, you need to interpret what Luke is saying there. He is giving all of these guidelines and rules about loving your enemies and turning the other cheek and all those principles. You've got to understand, he's not teaching a new code of external conduct so much as he is saying, "This is the new heart attitude of those who are truly born again." That's a huge difference. One is a works salvation, one is a true message of the new birth.

When the Bible is preached, emphasizing the author's original intent but with contemporary application and the congregation then hears that message with understanding and obedience, that is the highest form of worship in the church. Did you hear that? When the word is preached and we are giving the original intent of the Scriptures with contemporary application and then you receive that with a humble yieldedness to obey it, change whatever you need to change in your thinking and behavior, then that is the highest worship that we can give to God. The preaching of the word is the highest form of worship. So Bible preaching. Now, obviously we could preach a series of messages on preaching the word or Bible preaching but we don't have that time today.

Let's go to II. and these are like links in a chain, one necessarily leads to the other. Now, they are reciprocal in that they go back and forth but if we will preach the word properly, we will begin to ground our people in sound doctrine. Now, the word "doctrine," don't make it a difficult word, it just means "teaching." I mean, somebody's got to express in teaching what we believe and how we are going to function. That's all doctrine is. Doctrine is what we hold to as this is what we believe and this is how we're going to function as the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore since doctrine or teaching is going to fashion what we believe and how we function, it must be sound teaching or sound doctrine. Sound has the idea of being reliable and accurate and faithful. In fact, teaching and guarding sound doctrine is the main task of God's pastor.

Let me just run through these pastoral epistles. Now, the pastoral epistles are the letters that the older minister, Paul, writes to his younger ministers, Timothy and also Titus, and

he is giving them the marching orders for the man of God in the ministry. Notice what he says in these numerous passages. 2 Timothy 1:13, "Retain the standard of sound words," same thing as sound doctrine, "which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus." So retain, protect and hold onto sound doctrine, young preacher. 2 Timothy 4:3, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires." Now, that word "endure" means that to hear sound teaching from God's word requires more than you being amused and entertained about what's going on. It requires that you have a manly discipline to receive and think on the rich things of the word of God that are going forth. But he says, "But the time will come when men will be lazy. They'll be girly in their stamina and they won't have the discipline to receive the rich truths of the word of God." So he says to Timothy, "Hang in there. Keep preaching it. Don't backup and never change even if the time comes when they'll want to chase something else." Titus 1:9, "holding fast the faithful word," this is talking about doctrine now, "in accordance with the teaching," what the teaching is, the doctrine God has once for all delivered to the church and to the saints, "that he may be able to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict." The pastor has and I do not enjoy that job, the responsibility before God of calling sheep in when necessary and saying, "Brother, you're teaching something that's not quite right. We need you to change that." Let me ask you: if we did that to you, would you receive that? Would you receive that as the responsibility of the God called pastors of your church? Well, you should. Titus 1:13, "This testimony is true. For this cause reprove them severely," now here he knots his things up in the pastor's responsibility. Here you're supposed to be quite firm, it even has the idea of a harsh reprimand. "Reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith," you could easily translate that sound in true doctrine. Titus 2:1, "But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine." Then 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." So what is he talking about? What is the good work? Well, the teaching, the proof, the training in righteousness, that is, teaching the true doctrines of God. And what enables us to do that? Only the word of God.

Those are and there are several more, the exhortations of the pastor's main job to teach, implement, nurture, encourage, guard, reprove, rebuke, whatever is necessary to maintain sound doctrine in the church. And when you see Paul going to such great lengths and amplify this to Timothy, it makes me mindful that the sheep must be prone to leaking. They must be prone to wandering. They must be prone to, "Hey, this looks interesting. Oh, well, this thing looks exciting over here." And the pastor's job is to keep on teaching, don't chase things that are not sound according to the word of God.

Now, in a church there must be conformity, unity on some doctrines, on a number of doctrines there can be differences of opinion. Now, we have, I think, matured a lot in this area. For example, when it comes to doctrines concerning how a man is saved, we require conformity there. You can't come into this church and teach that works is a part of salvation. That's an area we've got to have uniformity, amen? You can't come in here and teach that the Bible is not the inerrant word of God or that Jesus is not virgin born. There

are a number of foundational things that we have to require conformity. But now, we are not and this is something some good fundamentalist brothers probably 60 or 70 years ago got off track on, they began making high rules in their church about how women should dress; how much makeup they should wear; whether or not they should cut their hair; how long men's here should be and 1001 other things that might be wise advice but should not have been held up as essential doctrine. So we've got to be careful that we let things that God does not speak to clearly be allowable for many different views and ideas and interpretations but there are essential doctrines, obviously, we must hold to.

Now, also under sound doctrine, this is so deeply important because, let me tell you why this is important before I say it: when we preach, God is revealed. Now listen, God must be revealed accurately for who he is and for all that he is. We do not have the liberty to say there are some things in the Bible that are difficult and there are some things that are mysterious and there are some things that are upsetting to people and so we are conveniently going to sort of leave that out. Now, why can't we do that? We can't do that because then we leave out some of what God wants the saints of God to know about himself. I just don't have that right to introduce to you a partial God. I must bring him in all of his fullness to you even the challenging, difficult, mysterious parts. Aren't you glad that God's bigger than your little brain? And when your pastor preaches the authoritative inerrant word of God hopefully every so often something comes at you about God that rattles your cage and you have to humble yourselves once again. By the way, there are only two kinds of people: humble people who are saved and arrogant people who are still lost. Only two kinds of people: those who receive the word and those who run from it. And only the Spirit of God can make a man so that he says, "Pastor, don't hold back. You must give me the whole counsel of God." And I'm telling you what it does to me as I read and study, I can't tell you how much I am learning. I've been preaching 31 years and you've given me time to prepare and preach like few churches do and I'm telling you, I am still marveling over the glories and the wonders and the wisdom and the beauty and the powers of my God.

We must teach those doctrines that are difficult. This is becoming out of vogue. Just this week, it's amazing, I spent hours and hours and hours in my study just meditating and writing down thoughts as God gave them to me and I looked and saw this article in a Baptist magazine and it said that in a Baptist association in Kentucky, that association had a request by a new church to be added into the fellowship of this association, and that particular association wrote and I've got it written down here, I'm going to quote it to you, that they would not receive that new church because they were too Calvinistic and I quote, "because they affirmed the doctrines of grace and election." Brothers, they might as well have said they affirmed that salvation is by Christ alone. I can take you to every, mark my words, every major confession of faith that Baptists, at least that of the Southern Baptist lineage, have ever held starting with the 1644 London Confession of Faith coming all the way up to the Baptist faith message of the Southern Baptist Convention just a few years ago and every single confession of faith has a strong affirmation on grace and election, but for these churches, I think about 60 churches, they voted that we reject you if you hold to those doctrines. They might as well have said, "We no longer want to be a part of any known Baptist entity for the last 400 years." But it's just a day where

doctrine doesn't matter and doctrine is out the window and people just want to push that away. That is such a wrong thing. I know there are some good brothers in that association. I know there are some good godly people but my thing is what were they thinking?

We want to be like the Apostle Paul who said in Acts 20:27, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose or counsel of God." That means all the wondrous, rich, glorious teachings, doctrines of the word of God including those that are challenging; including those that make me uncomfortable; including those I can't fully explain or comprehend. The whole counsel of God. You see, when we faithfully preach the word, we are faithfully teaching sound doctrine which first we resist. Can I get a witness? First we resist. "Wait a minute, I don't know about that, now." I do that, don't you do that? Hey, if that happens to you, guess what? You're normal. First we resist but if the Spirit of God works in you, he'll humble you to where you'll kick out your resistance, receive his truth and that is worship. Did you hear that?

Bible preaching, sound doctrine, number 3, on these we stand: making disciples. Making disciples. Matthew 28:18-20, "Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'" Verse 19, "Go and make disciples." That's what we must be committed to. I long time ago decided I'm not worried about the big numbers coming in because I found through the years that we can have a lot of big numbers but I found when you get in something like that, most often that which goes up like a rocket comes down like a rock. Just give it a little time. So instead of reaching numbers, though we're always out after souls, we need to be committed to making disciples. But if we're going to make disciples, we need to have a biblical understanding of how are disciples made? What does the Bible say about how we make disciples? Now, I understand that we've baptized 34 people since the early parts of June and we have 22 more in baptismal counseling but when you think about this 50 some odd people, I thought, you know, we use none of the methods that modern evangelism says are really needful to reach the lost for Christ. Why aren't we into a lot of the new methods and new ways to get people saved? Because the Bible is the only manual we need. What the Bible teaches about reaching the lost and therefore making disciples out of them, is all that we need to make disciples.

Extra biblical additives are methods however well intended, end up being a hindrance in the long run and, man, I can prove this in church history. I can show you when many of the things that all of us, I didn't grow up in church but most of us are used to. It's just the way you do it. I can show you the dates and times in church history where it came in and it's easy to chronicle how they were effective to some degree, the motives were pure, they weren't overtly evil things but they are not required by Scripture and slowly the churches began to embrace these extra biblical methods as equal to the word of God and they end up getting in the way of the Gospel message which is the only message that can save.

So let me answer this question right quick: how does one become a true disciple of Christ? 1. He has to hear the Gospel. He must hear the Gospel. As Scriptures teach, this is primarily through preaching but there may be many other ways someone would share the Gospel with a person and we applaud all of those. Now listen to me, when the Gospel is shared, there must be something shared of the holiness of God. You always start with God. Far too often we start with the need of man but, you see, a person can't understand their need until they know who the God is they have offended. So you start with a holy God. Secondly, they must know something of the sinfulness of man and how they have offended and sinned against this God and why and how this God justly holds wrath against them for their sins and offenses. Thirdly, they must know something of the provision of Christ. Now, we're not at all talking about all the great teachings surrounding these things but they should know something of Christ's death for sinners on the cross. Then lastly, they must be told of their responsibility to respond with repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and then a life that produces fruit typical of a true disciple. Not saying the fruit saves, I'm just saying that's part of the response when someone is genuinely saved.

So they must hear the Gospel. Secondly, they must experience the new birth. There has never, ever, ever, ever been a true convert unless they have been born again. They must experience the new birth. When John Wesley was preaching in the Great Awakening back in the middle part of the 18th century, they asked John Wesley, "Why do you keep saying all the time you must be born again?" You've got to understand he was preaching mostly to the Anglican church, the church of England where they had long since lost evangelism and you just went through a few hoop jumps and a few motions and added to the church. John Wesley and Charles Wesley and Jordan Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards and those men of that era that led that Great Awakening knew they had to preach something to shake these church members up and so they stayed on it, "You must be born again." When they asked John, "Why do you keep saying you must be born again?" He said, "Because you must be born again."

Now, our statement of faith here at Grace Live Church is the New Hampshire Confession of Faith of 1833. It's the foundational confession that all other Southern Baptist confessions were taken from and here's what it says in article 8, "We believe that repentance and faith are sacred duties and inseparable graces," here's the phrase, "wrought in our souls by the regenerating Spirit of God." That's the Southern Baptist foundational confession of the new birth. These things, repentance and faith, are wrought in our souls by the regenerating Spirit of God. You can't say it any clearer. Unless the Spirit works, you're not getting saved. So we've learned through the years to look for more than, "Did you pray a prayer?" That's important. I can't imagine somebody getting saved that didn't call on God in prayer. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that but we need to look for more than that. You see, you can do that in the flesh. The flesh can do anything you tell it to do but the flesh cannot rebirth itself. God alone can do that. In Acts 11: 18, the Bible says, "When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, 'Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.'" How did the Gentiles start believing? God granted to them the repentance that leads to life. Now, we teach and believe that anyone who will turn to Christ will be saved and

we teach and believe that all men everywhere should be called to repentance and faith, but on the back side of that we understand, the Spirit must work.

So a person must hear the Gospel and he must experience the new birth. You see, the Spirit must work first in a person because at first a person does not want to repent. Do you know anybody on earth that when you go up to them and say, "Everything you're doing is wrong, everything you think is wrong and worse than that, you're a vile abomination before a holy God. He's going to crush you in wrath." Do you know anybody that naturally rejoices over that? But a man whom the Spirit of God has wrought the new birth says, "Yes, that is true. That is me." You see, that's not what he naturally desires to do but the Spirit brings him to that conviction. Nobody naturally wants is this modified Gospel which is not a Gospel at all that we're hearing preached in pulpits today and it's prominent on our televisions whereby they say your sin is having a low self-esteem. Your sin is that you don't have enough money. Your sin is that your health is bad and Jesus will fix all of that. Jesus may fix that but that's a byproduct and that's not the Gospel. Only the Spirit can bring a man to the humility to say, "I am a wretched, lost soul and I need Christ and I have no hope but him."

Our evangelism must be more than a shallow man-centered message that emphasizes a little more than a 30 second sinner's prayer. Why? Because we must make disciples, not get decisions. Disciples are new creations of God. Today too often churches are getting decisions and not making disciples. "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation." Not mildly changed, he is a new creation. A true disciple is one that's become a new creation as the Spirit of God has changed his life through the Gospel and it is a change that lasts. Did you hear that? Brothers and sisters, though I remember standing down front, Brother Junior here was preaching our revival, he was preaching on the wheat and the tares, a man got up from back there we're about Brother Larry is, he ran down to the front weeping profusely. He just about tackled me. He said, "I'm a tare and I know it," and he prayed and called out to God. Two weeks later he left his wife and he's never been back to church. He was stirred, he had emotionalism, he may have been sincere but he was not born of God.

The fruit that is born of God lasts. Listen to what Jesus said in John 15:16, "You did not choose Me," Jesus said, "but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit," now listen, "and that your fruit should remain." I think God is a thousandfold more pleased if 25 people are baptized this year and three or four years later 25 people are still walking with God versus 200 baptized this year and, by the way, we went many years and baptized 200 and we did the research and up to 90 percent of them couldn't be found a couple of years later because we were in that mode of getting decisions, not making disciples. A. T. Robertson is the most notable Greek scholar of all time, at least among Baptists, and A. T. Robertson said this phrase that we should go and bear fruit and this fruit should remain means this is not a mere spurt. We've got a lot of spurt Christians. They have a little spurt and they're gone. He says this is permanent growth and fruit bearing.

Now, listen to me, I know I'm taking too long. No, I'm not. You're all right. Listen, we must get over the present notion that discourages the content of the message but encourages the methods of sharing the message. It's not the methods that save souls, it's the message that brings a man to true faith. It's the truth about Christ that saves. Do you know what? The Bible is totally, now listen to what I'm going to say, totally silent on methods to share the Gospel other than just preaching it. It's just not there. Now, we teach some methods but we kind of downplay it because what we found is persuasive men or women with good personalities are able to take methods and get a lot of people to do stuff but they don't become disciples a lot of times, so it's good to have a method but don't rely on a method. It's the message and not the method that saves lost souls.

IV. This is my last point. On these we stand: accountability for our discipleship. Accountability for our discipleship. Serious, consistent accountability for Christian discipleship was once a common part of church life. It was very prominent in the first century church and it was prominent in Baptist life and in Baptist history until about 75 to 100 years ago. As a matter of fact, I read not too long ago that during the 19th century the Baptists of Georgia dismissed 85,000 church members for unrepented of sin. You'd have to go about the next hundred years to find that many in the whole Southern Baptist Convention. 85,000. Now, were there some abuses? Yes. Let me ask you something: do you discipline your children? Have you always done it perfectly? When you found out you maybe were all little too harsh one time or maybe another time you were a little too negligent, did you throw the whole principle out and never discipline again? Of course not. Of course not.

I've read in Baptist business meeting minutes, now this is like century plus ago, that a church that refused to exercise church discipline was removed from the local association of Baptist churches. They'd kick you out if you did not practice accountability in disciplining your church. Do you know what today? Today it's right the opposite. You'll get removed from fellowship, not officially perhaps, but in all practicality, if you do try to obey these clear biblical principles. You see, there are two rolls that every Christian needs to be on, two rolls, r-o-l-l-s. 1. Salvation's roll. You need to make sure your name is written in the Lamb's book of life. You need to have your name written in heaven by receiving Christ as Lord and Savior. The second roll is the service roll. That's the roll of the local church. God saved you and put you in a church. You see, when you join a church, you sign up for active duty. Joining a church can't save you though it is the centerpiece of your active discipleship. A study has been done recently that showed that the average Southern Baptist Church has 233 members and 70 in active attendance so only 30 percent of those the church says are disciples even attend church on any given Sunday. That ought to break our hearts. That should grieve us deeply. And I found that this is just kind of generally accepted that it's not good but it's just the way it is. I remember when I first started in the ministry that all of the churches that were held up to me as a model to follow had thousands and thousands on their roll who never came. I remember one particular church and this was a good man that did a lot of good things but he had 30,000 people on the roll and about 6,000 in attendance. There was just no accountability for their discipleship in that church.

Another new thing came along that said, "Well, we've got all these people that aren't acting like disciples, aren't involved in discipleship, don't even come to church, so we'll just put them on an inactive roll." Let me say something to you, brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus has no inactive disciples. Did you hear me? Jesus has no inactive disciples. There is no such thing. Now, there's brothers and sisters who are sick and limited. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the guy who claims he's a follower of Christ, the church leaves him on the roll but he's just out there doing his own thing and never comes and never tries to serve the Lord. So unfortunately by our actions, we've taught in the church today that being a disciple is separate from active church attendance and active service and actually corrective discipline is a foundational part of true discipleship. Matthew 18:15-17, "If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." So that's just the general principle of brothers and sisters in the body holding each other accountable. Now look, always loving, always selfless. It's not about you raising yourself up as a judge with authority, it's about you being humble and meek and pleading in absolute confidence with another brother or sister, but the principle of accountability is to be active and alive in the body of Christ. You see, if the church cannot say how a discipleship not live, it cannot say how a disciple should live. We have the leaky bucket syndrome today. Churches pour out a lot of sound doctrine at times but they are indifferent to how members live their lives. All the attention is on what's poured in and no thought to how it's received or lived out.

Accountability and discipleship must be reflected in the way we receive members. Receiving new members should be a biblically careful and meaningful process. There should be an understanding of the biblically defined blessings and duties of church membership and a church that is weak in accountability or in a church rather that's weak in accountability, examples become unclear and models are confused. If you were in a church like the one I mentioned earlier, by the way, this is common, where two couples in the church swapped spouses more or less, and you've got a 15-year-old teenage son or daughter, what do you think they think about that? You're telling this 15-year-old son or daughter, "Live pure. Be clean. Live a holy life." But the church you attend is allowing that kind of wickedness to go undealt with. Do you know what? Surveys, now these are professional studies, have shown us that up to 80 percent of our young people leave the church after they graduate from high school. Quit going. Do you know why? They're not stupid. It's a joke and they know it. And don't be surprised if you raised your child in a church that has no accountability or discipline, that when they reach 21 or so one day they put their finger in your face and say, "I'm living in sin. I'm living in rebellion. I'm doing what I want to do because that's the way the people at the church always did it." We don't know what we're doing when we dishonor the word of God. Now listen to me: I have a lot of sympathy for pastors out there and even good men in churches who would like to see their churches move in this direction but meet up with the most vile and violent opposition, so I think there ought to be some compassion and understanding that it's a tough job. As a matter of fact, the great majority will lose their pastorate so don't get

on a high horse of arrogance and look down, have a heart of understanding and even pity and compassion for the difficulty good men face in the churches today in just trying to do these things. But in the meantime, we're losing and have lost a generation of kids.

Well, I'm going to skip a bunch of stuff here and go to some concluding thoughts. Now, concerning these irreducible minimums of true church life, true Bible preaching, not using the Bible in my message but preaching the word, sound doctrine, the teaching that says this is what we believe and how we're going to function, making disciples and then being accountable for discipleship, those irreducible minimums of a church striving to be a true church are what we want to be committed to, it's what we are committed to and what we want to continue to be committed to hear at Grace Life Church of the Shoals. A lot of churches are like trains in a train station, some of them just got on the wrong track and they're just going in the wrong direction. Others are sitting in the train yard and they believe right but they've never gotten on track and gone anywhere at all; they're just kind of there and it's in their minds. You just don't know how many pastors I talk to over the weeks who say, "Man, I believe these things and it's so difficult," and they are just kind of there and, boy, they need our prayers and encouragement. Some have grasped things and made some steps and they're on the track, they just haven't gone anywhere yet. Then, praise the Lord, there are some whom by God's grace and only God's grace, they're out of the station yard and are on the right track and they're going forward. Now, they need continual maintenance, they continue to learn and grow but they're on the right track and they are moving forward for the glory of God and his church. Well, that's what I want us to be.

In Jeremiah 6:16, is a powerful, penetrating statement of Scripture, "Thus says the LORD, 'Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, Where the good way is, and walk in it; And you will find rest for your souls. But they said, "We will not walk in it.'" The picture here is that a guy has been traveling a good long time and he thought, "Man, this is great." His emotions were thrilled about it. His mind said, "Boy, this is the right thing to do." And he's going down this novel, creative, exciting new path and he realizes many years later, "I've messed up. I've gone the wrong way. We're doing this wrong," and the Lord says, "Step back. Be discerning. Men of God in Grace Life Church, be mature. Don't be a girlie man following your little emotions. Be a man of God. Discern. Where is the old path? The one I missed a long time ago?" And the Lord said, "Get on that path. That's the good way."

About 25 years ago, we as a church basically said, "Whoa, stop, let's look at this thing. What are we doing? Why are we doing it and what patterns are we following?" About 25 years ago, we said whoa and we stood by the way and we studied and we asked: what's the true track based on the word of God that the church in maybe generations past used to be on but have wandered off and we need to get back on it? By the way, we at Grace Life Church, I don't care what's going on out there, we've done done it. We've already done it. We've been on those tracks. We tried it out and we came back off and said we need to find a new way because all the new tracks lead to downward and more dangerous places. So about 25 or so years ago we stood by the way and said, "Where is the old path? What does the Scripture teach about the purpose and practices of God's church?" The new paths

discovered by men are the ways of idolatry and apostasy and we desire them no longer. We are now committed to the old path, the good way, and we purposed to walk in it. And by God's grace, the train called Grace Life Church of the Shoals, I believe has gotten out of the station. I believe it's gotten on the right track and I believe it's moving forward. Never perfect, never arrived but I believe that's true.

For many years we've been committed to preaching the word of God. We've been committed to sound doctrine. We've been committed to make disciples. We've been committed to exercise accountability for discipleship and God has answered our prayer about our vision statement. Do you remember our vision statement 23 or so years ago? We just said this is what we believe is what God would have our church to be about and that vision statement is to be a biblical church God uses as a model for others. Not that we're the model but that God would use us to be an encouragement to others who have the same kind of heart. I told you about the International Mission Board coming to us and saying we'd like to use you to encourage others in the way to approach missions. It's been a big change but in the last 10 or 12 years the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky has totally changed and they enthusiastically affirm, it's the largest seminary in the world, enthusiastically affirm the direction we're on. As a matter of fact, I had supper with Dr. Tom Nettles. Dr. Tom Nettles, I think, most people who know Baptist scholarship would say he's the leading historian among Baptists in the world today and Dr. Nettles said, "Brother Jeff, as we teach what we're teaching these preachers in our seminary today, what you at Grace Life Church are trying to live out, as we teach them these things that they go out to our churches, what do you think is going to happen?" And he was concerned. I said, "It's going to be a bloodbath. It's going to be awful. It's going to be difficult." Just this week a large church just outside of Athens contacted me and said, "Can I talk to you about changing some things. I realize we're not scriptural in a lot that we're doing in the church." Just this week, First Baptist Church outside of Nashville, Tennessee called me and said, "We want you to give us some guidance on some materials and things. We realize we've been on the wrong track. We're trying to get back to a more biblical track in our church." Just talk to one of our guys who is a partner with us up in Canada, Ernie, and Ernie just wept over the phone and said, "Thank you for making the conference free. I'm bringing 14 people this year and we need to keep learning to build a true church for the glory of God."

Just put our church plants up there, if you will, real quick. There is Grace Life Church of Hastings, Nebraska that, of course we were a part of coming alongside them and getting them started. Have you got it, guys? There's a little cute looking fellow up there with a beautiful wife who oversees that fellowship. What a blessing they are.

The Cross Church in Pensacola, Florida. One of our church plants. John, a great brother in Christ. Some good things happening there. As a matter of fact, he's asked us to come ordain him to the Gospel ministry. It's just really exciting to see these churches go forth and gain maturity and become settled and solid in their work.

Grace Life Church of Ankeny, Iowa. Very excited about what God's doing there.

Grace Life Church, Richland Center, Wisconsin. These are our former Hutterite brothers who are excited about evangelism. Just beginning learning to go out and share the Gospel and they're going forward and looking forward to be with us in February.

Grace Life Church, Forest City, Arkansas. I believe I saw some of those guys here this morning. Boy, we love Brother Jeff and his family, committed to be a glory of God focused, Christ honoring, Bible believing fellowship.

Grace Life Church at Dallas, Texas, one of the very first groups that contacted us and said, "Would y'all help us get a church started here in Dallas." Jesse Barrington there, he's one the left with his beautiful wife. Good brother. And the thing that just really impresses me is the humility. These people, listen, these people did not contact us and say, "Can you show us a way that we might run 500 in five years?" It didn't enter their mind. Here's what they said, "Can you help us build a biblical church?" Man, that excites me.

Aren't you glad you're part of this? Does that do anything for you? Well, it does me. We have some perspective churches, one in Hong Kong. This just kind of came our way. We weren't really looking for it and this dear brother there, we hope to come alongside him and help him plant, who knows, there may be a Grace Life Church in Hong Kong before too long.

Another group in Dallas, Texas that has contacted us. Sweet folks who love the Lord and they're about 50 miles from the other church that we have helped plant there in Texas. Ben M. pray for them.

Albuquerque, New Mexico, another group that has contacted us. Steve Rodriguez is the lead guy there. We don't have a picture there. Steve is going there this week to talk with them and, quite honestly, we're slowing this thing down but God is doing so much to honor our prayer 23 years ago. "God, if we try to obey the Bible, would you then use us to help others get on that track?"

2 Corinthians 8:5 and I'm about done. I know it's late. Thank you for being patient. 2 Corinthians 8:5, "this is not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God." And here's what I want to challenge you with this morning: brothers and sisters, by the grace of God we're doing the right things the right way for the right reason, the glory of God and we have been through many dangers, toils and snares but he has brought us safely through, has he not? What I'm saying to you is this is a place you can put your family and raise your children with absolute confidence that they will be raised right and surrounded with the right influences and taught the right truths for the glory of God. This is no flash-in-the-pan ministry. In my heart I've been about what you've heard today for 30 years. 30 years. And now we come to a very practical point, our offering next week. This is a work and this is a ministry that you can give to joyously and generously with confidence. Not that we're perfect, but that we're striving to be on track and going forward doing the right things the right way for the glory of God and who knows what God is going to do. Folks, I'm telling you, I'm

convinced our greatest days are ahead measured by all the ways God measures success, not men, the way God measures success.

I just want you to sit there and I'm going to lead us in prayer. Brother Matt, if you would come and close us out. I've got to get in my car after the prayer and go to the funeral service that I'm preaching out in Athens, but I want to challenge, I always speak to the men because, men, you are the leaders and I know I'm preaching to the choir to most of you, these are things we've covered 1,000 times over these 23 years but I want you to genuinely stand with me, not literally stand but in your heart stand with me and say, "Pastor, that's what I want us to be about today, tomorrow, five years from now, 50 years from now." Isn't it good to have young guys like Brother Matt come along so that the church isn't built on Jeff Noblit or my personality but on the word of God? Amen?

Let's bow in prayer.