

Striving to Avoid Extra-biblical Excess

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I'm going to share with you in this session not what I typically do. I'm an expositor but I'm not going to basically do that in this session today. I took the time to seek the Lord and think about if I were beginning to pastor a church that is a new church plant or if I were trying to revitalize an existing church, what are some of the things I wish maybe I had heard 25 or so years ago. I've been a part of Grace Life Church at the Shoals now for close to 31 years as far as being a part. I've been on staff next month 30 years and from the very beginning it's been a reforming and revitalizing process. I've often said that every pastor should have to stay in the same church 30 years so he has to see his own fruit. Far too often we do stuff and leave it for the next guy. But staying here that long, it caused me to see so many things we were not doing well and so many things we had out of balance biblically speaking and as we have been in this reforming process here at this church for 30 years, I can tell you very honestly that I have been reformed more than the church. God has a way of doing that, doesn't he? You go out to fix and correct things and God works on you. Isn't that good? Praise his name.

We've had some painful valleys we've gone through, three major splits since I have been senior pastor and I noticed a great amount of the damage, the desertions, the divisions we've had to go through were in some way or another connected to the idolatry of what I call extra-biblical excess. Studying the New Testament, you find this was a significant problem in the first century church as it is a significant problem in this century in the church. It seems that in each and every generation, the enemy repackages the old idols and parades them by the church to draw her away.

I. Let me talk about clarifying terms. When I talk about extra-biblical, what I mean are those rules or convictions, you might even say viewpoints, that are not specifically required by Scripture. They're not clearly taught or they're not essentials, you might say. They are extra-biblical. I do not mean that they are unbiblical, I just mean they're not absolutes. Now, all individuals have extra-biblical convictions or rules, things that we think are wise. I would lump things like what entertainment your family may go to; how you will dress; your views on makeup. The list can go on and on and on and these things are not bad, they can be good as your personal preference and your personal conviction. They're not specifically perhaps spelled out in Scripture but based on biblical principles you adopt them for your life, your home and for your family. Also, churches have them. I mean, there are a number of things we have to do in structuring and organizing the church and functioning as a church that the Bible doesn't specifically say, "Thou shalt do

it this way," but you have to develop some of these and I think these are, of course, healthy as long as these things that we come up with we do not view them as adding to our righteousness. Extra-biblical things that we do.

That's a quick statement, but you ought to think on that a while. Do you really think in some way your approval before God is helped by extra-biblical things, rules and convictions you have as good as they may be? Also, you need to make sure that you in no way are viewing these as something that makes you superior to others, makes you a part of an elitist fellowship perhaps. Thirdly, can you rejoice with a brother or sister who has freedom in the area where you have some strict convictions? Can you really rejoice and say, "Well, you know, the Scripture doesn't specifically spell this out so I can actually rejoice in that fellow's brother or sister who doesn't have my conviction in this area."

Well, that's a little bit about extra-biblical. It's not unbiblical but it's beyond the clear teaching of Scripture. We all have those; all churches have those. Here's what I mean by extra-biblical excess or out of balance, in other words. It's when something becomes a structured pillar in the church but the Bible doesn't teach it as such. Something becomes paramount. It's too important when the Scriptures do not lay it out to be that way. In other words, to join a particular church a new member has to understand that they must wholeheartedly embrace a certain thing or a certain structure or a certain form of doing things if they're going to be in that church even though the Scriptures are not real clear there. Or maybe it's excess when it becomes the church's identity yet it's not clear in the Scriptures. I want you to be careful here and take what I'm saying with the balance I'm trying to present it in. I'm concerned about a lot of the metaphors and the qualifiers we have before the word "church" today. "Well, we are a seeker friendly church." Or, "We are an emerging church." Or, "We are a family integrated church." And this one really amuses me, "We're a cowboy church." Just out of curiosity, I watched a broadcast the other day of a cowboy church and at the end of that broadcast I thought, "That was a disservice to Christ and to cowboys."

I had a man tell me one day, "Well, we're trying to build a contemporary church." Now listen, there can be good things and good brothers in these movements. Some of them go to real idolatrous excess but there can be good things. I'm not saying that but I think we want to stay centered on the gospel. We want people to be attracted not because we have certain structures and forms or we dress up like John Wayne westerns or what. That should not be the center. That should not be the draw. The gospel must draw them or we must fail. So I just throw that out as a caution. If you use one of those descriptors, I'm not necessarily saying you're evil or wrong. Please get the spirit of what I'm saying. We just need to be careful when we take matters that are more matters of personal preference, when these things become more prominent than Christ and the gospel. I think sometimes, too, these types of things become the basis for choosing a church and that's definitely an excess.

We had a pastor who wrote us some time ago and this is a good man, I mean, if you heard him preach, his theology is sound, his preaching is good. But he wrote us letter rebuking us for using more than a piano in our worship service and he made it very clear he could

not choose to come here because we use more than a piano. This is a good man. His doctrine is sound; his preaching is edifying or, at least, I found it edifying. I think that's a good example. We've had folks leave us here at Grace Life because we have a nursery or an organized student program. "I think that's an idol." That would be extra-biblical excess. In these cases, often there is but an obligatory nod given to the doctrine of Christ in the church and the doctrine of the gospel, maybe only a brief investigation into the love of God and love for the brethren evident in the church and the spiritual fruit that's evident in the church because there's such an obsession with this extra-biblical practice that's become their idol. The thing that matters becomes secondary. God's priorities and methods become minimized while our own become exalted.

Secondly as I thought through this and thought what would have helped me to have heard early on, II. Watch for worldly externalisms. Worldly externalisms. Now, I want you to go to Colossians 2 and this is woven tightly into where we've just come from in I. But in Colossians 2, there is powerful teaching here as Paul is wrestling, if you will, with the church at Colossae about these very things and that is strong influences into the church at Colossae about looking to things as vital or essential that are not vital and essential. First of all, notice verse 8. It's a strong command in the way that it's worded here in the Greek. Verse 8, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ." So here are all of these one things that people would try to impose on you, these extra-biblical excessive viewpoints and convictions. Then he says, "Rather than Christ." In other words, they are in contradiction to and opposed to Christ.

He calls these "elementary principles" and that's a powerful phrase to me. The rudimentary things. The basic things. In this context what he's saying is the elementary principles here are the legal or external ordinances or rules that are trying to be imposed on you as a church. A good cross-reference is Galatians 4:3, "So also while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world." So these elementary principles, the elemental things of the world, are I would like to say just works religion, externals or legalisms.

He says there "of the world." That means they're earthly. They're source is in the world instead of being the true wisdom out of heaven. In this context, I believe he means either the external ordinances of ancient Judaism or the heathenism that was common in the Gentile world. Either group philosophies, traditions of men, they're all the elementary principles that are just basic in the world.

So they boast of their higher spirituality and their wisdom with all these external ordinances and rules and yet it's all just worldly traditions. I say to my church often, "The highest form of worldliness is not the drug addict or the prostitute or the vile and wicked moral evils of our world although that is worldly, the highest form of worldliness is legalistic religion. It comes right out of the world. It's basic to man. Go anywhere you want where there is no enlightenment of truth and they'll have legalisms instead of Christ. It's a clinging to the carnal and not to Christ.

Now in this context and here's where I think it gets to where we wrestle in every generation in the church, these are professing Christians and probably many are Christians who have been drawn away to some degree. They acknowledge Christ nominally yet in spirit by their emphasis on externals, they actually deny him. They're looking to external rules or ordinances and they're like the man who took his lamp out before the sundial at midday to try to tell the hour. Why would you put the feeble lamp out when you've got the brilliance of the sun? These external ordinances are feeble and weak attempts when we've got the full sufficiency of the Son of God.

Look at verse 20, "If you have died with Christ," here's that phrase again, "to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees," and then he gives some examples, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" Why would you yield back to letting people bring extra-biblical external things to come to bear as absolutes in the church or essential in the church when your Lord has died to them and you've died to them with him? "Why go back under that bondage?" he's saying.

Verse 21, he gives some examples of the type of things they were dealing with and this, I'm sure, has to do mostly with foods that were considered unclean or not sanctified. He says, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" The scholars say there is an ascending level here. "Do not handle," has the idea of, "Well, I might touch it, that's the rule, but I can touch it for a little while but not very long." And then another group comes along, "We're more spiritual than you. We won't even taste or touch it at all." Have you ever been around a group that they're always trying to out-humble one another? "Well, I can out-humble you. I can have more rules than you can have." "Well, I can be more strict than you can." "Well, I can deny myself better than you." Brothers and sisters, we always have some of that. As a matter of fact, every one of us has a little bit of that in us but you're supposed to keep it repressed and not let it become a movement within the church because it looks so right. It looks so spiritual. And Paul says it's the height of worldliness. Some of the most pious, self-denying, self-abasing people are the most worldly people among professing Christians. Not all, there are genuine people who walk in that kind of sacrifice and thank God but many of them are into flaunting themselves. Now, I'm telling you, they will tear the church apart. That's why he's warning them here.

Verse 18, go back up there. He says, "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize," that is, the full satisfaction you have in Christ, the full sufficiency of Christ, "by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind." That's powerful. He says, "These people are walking in these teachings and prescribing to external laws and legalisms as if they're actually denying the flesh but it's actually a fleshly indulgence." Did you get that? That's what Paul's saying. I think I wrote down here that this is not a spiritual self-denial but rather a fleshly self-indulgence.

Look down at verse 23 as he amplifies this. "These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment

of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence." Did you hear that last phrase? Of no value against fleshly indulgence. "Self-made religion" is a phrase he uses there in verse 23. The scholars say it just means "will-worship." It means you've brought your will and your personal preference to bear in contradiction and in the place of God's true will and what God says is true religion. Nadab and Abihu in the Old Testament were struck down dead for burning strange incense the Bible tells us. Uzziah was struck with leprosy for usurping the office of the priest. Saul lost his throne for building a monument to himself when it wasn't God's will. Why did God do these things? Because they did more than what was required. They were of themselves deciding, "Well, if God calls me to this, I'll do these extra things and I'll be more holy." You can't add to the sufficiency of Jesus Christ. You can't add anything to the perfection and the righteous standing you have in him. Quit trying.

So these external ordinances as Paul says in verse 23, look like humility and self-denial but in reality they are proud self-made religion which virtually rejects the dignity of communion with Jesus Christ. Someone said true self-denial regards the spirit and not external forms of self-mortification as the means which profits sanctification. Now, I think what happens in a lot of people's hearts and minds is their truly converted and they know the Lord and then they struggle with sin again and they're grieved and this guilt rises up in their hearts and minds and they decide that, "I've got to fight this," and they turn to what's natural, the elementary principles of the world and they turn to rules and ordinances of external restraint to help them avoid this sin. I'm not saying that's all totally bad, it depends on the motive of the heart, but often what you do is you just pile up rule upon rule, law upon law and as Paul says it's no guard against fleshly indulgence. As a matter of fact, Paul says in the book of Romans that the law can in no way stem that tide of fleshly indulgence. As a matter of fact, the law is but an imperfect dam that causes the waters of the rebellious heart to rise and just steam and foam all the more.

So here's what I'm exhorting you about as I exhort myself and look on our experience here in many things where we're still learning and growing: be careful about those that bring what I call externalisms: their set of rules, their set of ordinances that if we'll do this, then we'll really raise our children right; if we'll do these things, we're really going to have the right marriages; or if we'll reorganize the church around these rules, then it's really spiritual. I think sometimes, brothers and sisters, we need to get back to saying, "Chapter and verse. I need chapter and verse. Are these personal preferences or just the word of God?"

Something else that I see myself in so much through these years of learning and growing, III. Watch for pendulum swings. Watch for pendulum swings. In Matthew 23:15 our Lord said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves." That's a classic pendulum swing. The Jews went out and they found these people in heathen darkness and they pulled them out of heathen darkness and bring them into Jewish legalism. From one excessive extreme and swing over to another. So they're condemned for the paganism on this side and condemned for their trust in legalism on the other. You see, most of us come out of or desire to come out

of weak churches, churches that seemingly preach another gospel, churches where doctrine is weak at best, it's man-centered mush infused with psychology and lots of easy believism. At best it seems that there's only a token of gospel substance in the message of the church. The majority of the members are probably unregenerate. 30-50% of our membership seldom even come to church, show up at all. Most of the men of the church are carnal and uncommitted; they're not the spiritual leaders of their families. The church is program driven. It reeks of fun, amusement and activities or even worse, it's cold, empty and it's dead. Accountability and discipline are practically non-existent so your spirit is grieved and rightfully so and you want to see either this church totally reformed or you want to plant a new church. But here's where the enemy comes in: you turn away from the unbiblical excess and errors of the past and you often swing too far to the other side and you go to a whole new set of unbiblical excess and error. Been there, done that and I had a gracious enough church to love me and repent with me as we kept growing through those things. Do you know what I found over these 30 years and I'm just telling you, I'm still repenting and I'm still reforming and learning, but it's used to be that my swings would be way out to that wall and way out to this wall, maturity means my swings are a little tighter now. I'm not saying they're as tight as they ought to be all the time but, in other words, God catches me quicker.

I see many leaving churches that are loose and undisciplined and doctrinally weak only to form or join legalistic external churches. One extreme to the other. Now, it is a difficult line to walk but we must strive to maintain a biblical balance. If you're going to be around this ministry very long you're going to hear two things all the time: I have a 20 year vision and this is not an easy quick thing to reform a church; secondly, stay balanced, biblically balanced. Let's don't be excessive on either end.

This pendulum swing often happens because we obsess on the error that we came out of and we should be careful focusing on that which we came out of and focus more on what we want to become. In other words, let's not so much react to the error we've come out of, let's more act on the truth as we now know it. If you focus on the error, you'll almost always swing too far. Focus on the truth and be balanced. Let me give you one illustration. I could give you dozens, I'm sure, but one illustration that came to my mind is our Sunday School here at Grace Life Church and this approaching 20+ years ago when we saw so many things in the church we needed to work on that were grieving us and we saw some really ugly things happening in Sunday School. Real rebellious spirits, unbiblical things being taught and divisiveness brewing in these Sunday School classes and so one of my first notions was, "We're just getting rid of all of it. All these structures and forms of traditional Southern Baptist Sunday School, we're getting rid of it." But I'm so glad I didn't. I got to looking at the Scripture and found that in the Old Testament small group structure is taught and in the New Testament that principle is taught. I thought, "Why reinvent the wheel? We've got a small group structure." It wasn't the external form that was the problem, it was the unspiritual people in it that were the problem. And so we kept what we had and we reformed it and it's taken many, many, many years. I've often said you can't work any harder at small group lay ministry than we worked at it. We found that when we had carnal unspiritual people in our Sunday School or small groups we had an unhealthy, unbiblical ministry and when we grew up some

mature spiritual people to lead the small groups, we had a healthy biblical ministry. It wasn't a form, it was the hearts of those functioning in the form. So don't swing too far and throw stuff away that doesn't need to be thrown away. Don't go too far on that pendulum swing.

There are those who advocate today throwing out practically all structure and organization. It's almost like the more informal we are and unorganized we are, the more spiritual we are. Our charismatic friends did this 30-40 years ago as they came in and just kind of threw out everything about structure, "We're just going to all come and we don't even have to have a membership." I'm seeing some of that in some Reformed circles where it's just got to be very disorganized and just family-like and then it's really of God. Also, let everything be done decently and in order. It's not the form, brothers and sisters, it's the principles. Don't throw it all out. Some today have just gone from one set again over to a new set of structures. Listen, new external forms do not transform the heart, the gospel does. So many times we think that because we've got our doctrinal statement down now everything's fine. No, it's just starting. Oh, the war is just starting. You alerted the enemy. It's just starting.

One key for us that we try to remind ourselves of here over and over is to be glory of God focused in the church. It's just not about me. It's not about my preference. It's not about what I'm most comfortable with. It's not about my family's personal convictions and trying to make everyone else have those. It's about the glory of God and the glory of God is centered in the gospel and that should be the center of the church.

I bet in a hundred years you wouldn't pick IV as a part of this exhortation. IV. Watch silly women. Watch silly women. Look at 2 Timothy 3. Would you turn there? I'm saying this because Paul puts a lot of emphasis on it in 2 Timothy 3:6. I used the word "silly" and that's a good translation of the original Greek, that's the King James but others use "weak" instead of "silly." In 2 Timothy 3:6 the Bible says, "For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses." Now, I'm choosing not to deal with these creeps who creep in, these false teachers. We all know that's going on but how do they get a foothold? Where do they get their entrance into the church and cause the trouble that's wrecking so many churches today? Well, Timothy is warned by Paul that weak or silly women, actually the word means "little." I think it has the idea of not much substance. He goes in 2 Timothy 3:6 and says, "These are women who are weighed down with sins." You see, a sin-burdened conscience is easy prey for false teachers who promise the ease of that conscience if they will follow them and their rules. Did you hear that? You've got to get that. A sin-burdened conscience. These are women weighed down by sins and that sin-burdened conscience, it's first impulse is always to say, "Give me some external work, cold rule pattern something that will ease this conscience that's bothering me." And they're just easy prey for the next fad, the next gimmick, the next book that's written by somebody about, "You've got to do these things now." If they follow these unbiblical excessive teachings it will be a band-aid for their conscience that has never embraced the liberating grace of Christ. A. T. Robertson, the Southern Baptist Greek scholar, said this

and I quote, "It is amazing how gullible some women are with religious charlatans who pose as exponents of new thought." "Oh, this is the new thing."

The Bible says being weighed down with sin and having that bad conscience also leads to abandoning of sound doctrine. In 1 Timothy 1:19, "keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith." The bad conscience is connected to losing sound doctrine. So if they haven't come to accept the full sufficiency of Christ for their guilt and their shame and their condemnation, then they are easy prey and I believe women more so than men though men certainly are, prey to all of these excessive rules and movements and teachings that can come into the church and cause all kinds of problems.

Paul elaborates a little bit more to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:6 and says they are led by various impulses. Led by various impulses. You could translate that "various lusts." Now, I don't think it's necessarily animal lust, it's more that lust for change. These are silly women and they want the latest thing. What's the latest teaching? What's the latest new rule? What's the latest fad? And they're always looking for folks to join with them. Something new. Often it's go back to an old era and bring all of that culture and tradition back and then we'll really be holy. Well, 2 Timothy 3:7 is a real key here. Look at what he says there, "always learning," new rules, new teachings, new fads, extra-biblical stuff, "and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." The core issue. The liberating, freeing sufficiency of Jesus Christ and Christ by faith alone. That's the truth.

We had a season here where a group had left us and it was a very painful time in the church and I was really troubled about it. There were no biblical issues; there were no sin issues that were clear. They just had their personal views on things and they all left and I talked to an older evangelist and was sharing with him just looking for some encouragement and he said, "Brother Jeff, if you'll look at the families who left, you'll find that the majority of them are wife-led households." That's what Paul is telling Timothy and you know what? He was right. Now, the ladies didn't always stand up and speak, she just told her husband what to say. "Watch silly women," Paul says to Timothy. You know what we have found here at Grace Life is as the body matures and your men mature spiritually, this kind of takes care of itself. It really does. It's not that big a problem. And let me be balanced here because I pastor a church with a lot of godly, stable, mature women who are solid and trustworthy. But if you're planting a church or revitalizing a church, you'd better watch for silly women.

Next, V. Remember a sovereign God is behind all. Boy, I can't tell you how deeply this principle has encouraged me through the years. 1 Corinthians 11. A sovereign God is behind all. In 1 Corinthians 11:18, the Apostle Paul writes and he says, "For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it." The word "divisions" here is the word for "schisms." The scholars tell us this probably means a group that's together and they have a personal preference about things but they're not very organized; it's not an organized dissenting group yet, it's just kind of getting started. Then he goes on to verse 19 and says, "For there must also be factions among you." The word "factions" there is a different word. It has the idea, it's the

word we get "heresy" from. It means "a taking of sides." This has gone beyond a simple personal preference group to a formal separate group, a matured separation, if you will, within the church. So the divisions are kind of drawn there. Paul in verse 18 says, "I hear the report that there's some group over here kind of meeting and they've got their views and a group over here is meeting and they've got their views." Then in verse 19 he says, "And actually I'm expecting it to go further." Does that encourage you? Paul says, "It's going to go further. It's going to turn into formal parties opposed to one another."

First of all, I'd like to say to you that a factious spirit in the church is wicked and it's evil. When they go beyond just personal preferences where they respect others' personal preferences, when they cross the line into an organized party spirit, it's evil. That's why in Titus 3:9-11 Paul tells Titus, "Avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law, for they are unprofitable and worthless." I want to pause right there. Paul says, "All this discussion about law." Now this is an age when Judaism infected all of the known area and so they would probably say this is the height of important spiritual conversation. Paul says, "It's worthless. All these disputes about the law are worthless. They don't do any good." "Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned." Galatians 5:20 says one of the aspects of the fruit of the flesh is being factious within the church.

Here's what I want to talk about a little bit more here in verse 19. The way Paul expresses this to the church at Corinth is, "For there must also be factions." There must. There must also be factions in the church. It's a necessary experience, is what he says to them. I jotted this down and I think it's worth thinking on: as the new birth is a necessary experience to be a true Christian so factions are necessary experience to be a true church. I've just never seen the exception.

He says in verse 19 that it's necessary that we have these, look at verse 19, "so that those who are approved may become evident among you." So that those who are approved might become evident among you. I have a video illustration of this and in this video illustration, I have three things: the first one you see there, that's a magnet and that represents a factious man or a factious group arising in the church. That's just a block of steel there. It's solid and weighty. That represents the approved: there's weight to them; there's substance to them. Beside that one, those are metal shavings over there. Those metal shavings, that represents those who are not approved of God: they're light; they're not weighty; there's not much substance to them. So what God is telling us here is that God in sovereignty allows a factious man or a factious group to come into the church, arise in the church, and as he affects those who are approved or mature, they feel a pull like this magnet's pulling but they don't move. There is substance to them. But God makes sure that that factious man or party also influences the unapproved and they just jump to it and cling to it and that's who they identify with. What Paul is saying here: God sovereignly is behind what's going on so that he might purify and purge the church and make those who are approved of God evident and clear. Is that not amazing to you?

Now, be balanced. On the one hand we do everything we can and, man, we have worked so hard at Grace Life training our people in biblical counseling and biblical conflict resolution and discipline if you don't resolve your conflicts biblically. Amen? Somebody may have really sinned against you but if you don't resolve it biblically, we're going to discipline you before we discipline the sinner because that's sin. Amen? So we work hard at avoiding but even when those happen and, again, as a body matures these things become less and less of a consequence or even an occurrence in the church, but God is behind all. Findley is quoted in A. T. Robertson's Word Pictures on this verse and he says something that is so powerful, "Factions and factious men are magnets attracting unsound, unsettled minds." "That those who are approved of God might become evident." God's sovereign hand moves the factious man over the congregation to separate the approved from the unapproved.

Striving to avoid extra-biblical excess, I would call you to irrevocable reference point today: VI. Total abandonment to the gospel. Total abandonment to the gospel. In Genesis 32, Jacob wrestles with the angel, I believe he's wrestling with the Incarnate Christ. His hip is knocked out of socket and he won't let the angel go until the angel promises a blessing and that was an irrevocable reference point for Jacob. God changed his name to Israel. I just read a little while ago, just read a commentary that said the word "Israel" means "fight with God," one of the root words is fight with God. I think basically it meant, "Yeah, you fought with God. You lost." And so he has a reference point of a new experience with God but I think the main thing here for Jacob was a new confidence, a new resolve, a new reliance, a new faith that he could trust and stand on what God told him. I believe pastors need to have an irrevocable reference point concerning the gospel and some of you don't think you need this but I think many of us need this and that is that you go before God with all of your heart and you say, "If the Spirit of God does not take the preaching of the gospel and change lives and build this church, I'm sunk. That's it. That's it for me. I'm drawing a line in the sand. It's not the gospel plus home schooling. It's not the gospel plus this or the gospel plus that. Those things may be fine and well, some churches may do them, some churches may not, some in the family may, some in the family not. This church is going to be built on the gospel or we will fail. Period. God, if your Spirit does not energize my preaching or your gospel, we won't make it. Period." We need to get there.

I don't need to give you these references, you know them so well. Romans 1:16, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation." Not the gospel plus your rules and your ordinances and your niches and your fad and the things you are fond of. Just the gospel. "It is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Romans 16:25, "Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel." That's the way you're established before God. Paul told the Corinthians, "I am determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

I heard this little illustration during a season of time where God was dealing with me about this and God wasn't telling me to throw away our structures and our organizations and the ministries we had but God was working on Jeff Noblit to get me to the place

where my total reliance was on the gospel, not the, and I'm going to say it this way because I think by God's grace it is, the excellent way we organized this church because it's not in the excellency of the organization, it's in the gospel that builds the church. And I was dying a death to sometimes 15 and 20 years of hard work of structuring and organizing the church to be biblical and effective. But in my heart, though I preached the gospel and God had changed people, I just hadn't come to an absolute abandonment of everything else to it. Then I heard this story during that season. There's nothing much to it but it impacted me because of where I was. A preacher came to Spurgeon one day. He was very burdened and concerned that he was not seeing very many people converted in his ministry. So he asked Spurgeon about it and Spurgeon said, "Well, do you expect God to convert someone every time you preach?" The man said, "No." Spurgeon said, "That's why he's not doing it." "Preacher, where is your faith?" You mount that pulpit with the absolute resolve God is going to save souls through his gospel today. Now, he might not save them during the preaching but he will save them through the preaching of the gospel.

An irrevocable resolve, total abandonment to the gospel. During that difficult season when God was working on me, there were months because we were going through some tough, tough days as a church when literally it took all the energy I had to just stand up here and preach and God made me rely on, "If the preaching of the gospel does not sustain you in this church, you are over." It's the best thing that ever happened to me in my ministry.

Are you totally abandoned to the gospel? Do you believe God will change people and build his church under the gospel? Do you expect him to do that? Another habit that I picked up that I heard from Spurgeon was he said, "Every step of walking up to the sacred desk," he said, "I say, I believe in the Holy Ghost. I believe in the Holy Ghost. I believe in the Holy Ghost." Do you know what he was saying? "God, unless you empower this and use it, I'm sunk." Total abandonment to the gospel.

Let's pray together.