

Programs, Get Your Programs: Exposing the Flaws of a Fad-Driven Church

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Tomorrow one of my seminars will take a look at the decline and fall of American fundamentalism, and I'm going to be explaining why I believe the fundamentalist movement is dead and why I think it's not really even worth trying to resurrect the fundamentalist movement as we know it.

You may have seen that seminar listed in the Shepherds' Conference brochure, and if you don't know me, you might have assumed from it that I am a gung ho contemporary evangelical—someone who considers himself a member of the “new evangelical movement” as opposed to a “fundamentalist.” You might get the notion I'm all excited about the future of the evangelical movement and the direction today's evangelicals are headed. That's not the case. As bleak as the picture is for the fundamentalist movement (and if you come tomorrow, I think you'll see that it's pretty bleak), I'm convinced that mainstream evangelicals are in a whole lot *worse* trouble.

Now, I know that makes me sound like a pessimist. I hate to sound like such a prophet of doom, and I assure you that I am *not* a pessimist. I'm a Calvinist, and Calvinists by definition cannot be pessimistic. Seriously. But because I'm going to *sound* somewhat gloomy, I want to assure you that I see the hand of divine Providence in the outworking of history, and I know God's purposes are being fulfilled and will be fulfilled perfectly in the end. I'm not a pessimist, but that doesn't keep me from making a realistic assessment of the distressing state of current affairs in the visible church.

The evangelical movement right now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, is in a spiritual condition not very much different from the medieval church just before the Protestant Reformation. Think about it. Luther had to deal with Tetzels, the charlatan fund-raiser who went through Europe promising people miracles in return for money so that the Pope could build St. Peter's church in the Vatican. We've got at least a dozen Tetzels appearing daily on TBN, promising people miracles in exchange for money so that Jan Crouch can make the sets of their television studios gaudier than any room in the Vatican while she adds enough pink hair extensions to rival the Dome of St. Peter's.

The medieval church was overrun with superstition and ignorance. We've got people reciting the prayer of Jabez every day who are convinced that it's a magic formula that will bring them wealth and good luck.

The medieval church had Leo X and Machiavelli. We've got Bill Gothard and Gary Ezzo.

The medieval church saw a decline in doctrine and morality in the church and a corresponding increase in corruption, scandal, and man-centered worship. All of that is true today.

Worst of all, in the medieval era, the gospel was in eclipse and people were so woefully ignorant of biblical truth that men in Martin Luther's time could complete seminary and enter ministry without ever having learned "the first principles of the oracles of God." We're well on the road to that same situation today. Many seminaries are deliberately eliminating biblical and theological courses and replacing them with courses in business and marketing. And Christian leaders who call themselves evangelical are actually *encouraging* these trends.

Listen, for example, to Tony Campolo, arguing that today's evangelical seminary students need to be taught marketing savvy rather than theology and Scripture. This is from a book he co-authored with Brian McLaren, ironically titled *Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel*. Yet Campolo himself has missed the point. He is actually arguing that church leaders should follow the culture and study marketing techniques rather than theology. And he suggests this would be a good thing. He writes:

What if the credits eaten up by subjects seminarians seldom if ever use after graduation were instead devoted to more subjects they will actually need in churches—like business and marketing courses? It is *not* true that with a gifted preacher, a church will inevitably grow. Good sermons may get visitors to stay once they come, but getting folks to come in the first place [will] take some marketing expertise.

It was a marketing degree, not an M. Div., that Bill Hybels had when he launched the tiny fellowship that would one day be Willow Creek Community Church. It's not that Hybels is a theological lightweight, [but he's "brilliantly relevant"]—and the relevance comes not from giftedness or theological discernment, but from thoughtfully studying his congregation. As any good marketer would, Hybels deliberately surveys his people with questionnaires in order to determine what they worry about, what their needs are, what's important to them. . . . Then he schedules what subjects he will preach on in the coming year, and circulates the schedule to those on his team responsible for music and drama in the services.

The result is preaching that is . . . acutely *relevant*. But the process isn't something you'll learn in most seminaries. Maybe it's time that some business school courses find their way into seminary.

Now, I don't know where Tony Campolo has been for the past twenty-five years or so, but if his advice sounds the least bit fresh or novel to you, you haven't been doing much reading, and you haven't been paying attention to the drift of the church growth movement over the past three decades. What Campolo is suggesting is precisely what many evangelical seminaries started doing some twenty years ago. Pastors these days are carefully indoctrinated with the notion that they must regard their people as consumers. Religion is carefully packaged to appeal to the consumers' demands. There are marketing agencies that offer seminars for church leaders to teach them how to "brand" their churches to appeal to the most people. Most church leaders these days are

therefore obsessed with opinion polls, public relations, salesmanship, merchandizing, and customer satisfaction. They have been taught and encouraged to think that way by virtually every popular program of the past two decades.

In 1988 (seventeen years ago now), George Barna wrote a book titled *Marketing the Church*. It was published by NavPress—at the time a major mainstream evangelical publisher (a lot less mainstream these days). In that book, George Barna wrote, “The *audience*, not the message, is sovereign.” That was the basic idea. And it’s a notion that thousands of pastors and church leaders have uncritically imbibed—and it has been parroted in virtually every major book on church leadership up through and including *The Purpose-Driven Church*. The audience is sovereign. Their “felt needs” should shape the preacher’s message. Opinion polls and listener response become barometers that tell the preacher what to preach. That’s what Barna was calling for back in 1988. He wrote,

If [we are] going to stop people in the midst of hectic schedules and cause them to think about what we’re saying, *our message has to be adapted to the needs of the audience*. When we produce advertising that is based on the take-it-or-leave-it proposition, rather than on a sensitivity and response to people’s needs, people will invariably reject our message.

Compare that with the words of the apostle Paul, who (in 2 Timothy 4:2-5) said, “The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.” What was Paul’s point? Do you think he would have agreed with Barna, who said we *must* adapt our message to the preferences of the audience, or risk having them reject the message?

No, Paul told Timothy: “But you . . . fulfill your ministry.” “Preach the word! . . . in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.”

That is what we are called to do as pastors—not follow the fads and fashions of our culture. Not even to follow the silly parade of evangelical fads that have assaulted the church in wave after wave for two decades running. The fads and the programs are killing the evangelical movement. And I’m convinced that those who do not get back to the business of preaching the Bible will soon see their churches die—because, after all, the Word of God is the *only* message that has the power to give spiritual life.

And, frankly, the death of the fad-driven churches will be a *good* thing in the long term. It’s something I hope I live long enough to see.

Some of you are thinking I’m sounding like a pessimist again. After all, shouldn’t we be enthusiastic about the way the ranks of those who label themselves “evangelical” have swollen over the past fifty years? Isn’t it a good thing evangelicals now have enough clout to help elect a president and be recognized by most of the secular media as a movement to be reckoned with?

Think about it: in the late 1970s, when Jimmy Carter became President and the secular media discovered the expression “born again,” the average person in mainstream American culture didn’t even know what an “evangelical” was. But evangelicalism has ballooned so much in size and visibility and political savvy

that last month, *Time* magazine did a feature photo-essay and cover article titled “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals In America.”

Here’s why I don’t think that’s a particularly encouraging development: I read the *Time* magazine list of 25 influential evangelicals. That article by itself would have been enough to convince me the evangelical movement is in serious trouble. The list included people like T. D. Jakes, who denies the Trinity; former Lutheran-turned-Catholic priest Richard John Neuhaus; Joyce Meyer, the jet-setting charismatic prosperity-gospel preacherette; and Brian McLaren, the postmodern pastor who denies the authority of Scripture and wants to see the church make a radical break with just about everything that’s rooted in historic Christianity.

Thirty years ago, not one of those people would have even been included in a list of “evangelicals.” They are *not* evangelicals in the historic sense of the word. What’s changed? It’s not that more people became evangelicals, but that the concept of evangelicalism has been expanded to become all-inclusive. The word *evangelical* has lost its historic meaning. These days it means everything—and it therefore means nothing.

It’s clear where *Time* magazine thinks evangelicalism’s clout is being felt the most. It’s not in spiritual matters, but in the realm of politics and culture. And you know what? They are right. The word *evangelical* used to describe a well-defined theological position. What made evangelicals distinct was their commitment to the authority of Scripture and the exclusivity of Christ. Now evangelicalism is a political movement, and its representatives hold a wide variety of theological beliefs—from Neuhaus’s Roman Catholicism to Jakes’s heretical Sabellianism, to Joyce Meyer’s radical charismaticism, to Brian McLaren’s anti-scriptural postmodernism. There’s only one person in the entire list who would remotely qualify as an evangelical theologian, and that’s J. I. Packer. But Packer himself has been on a quest for the past 20 years to make evangelicalism as broad as possible.

Frankly, *none* of these people I just named would even agree among themselves on any distinctive points of doctrine. They wouldn’t even agree on the essential points of the gospel message. The one thing they *do* agree on is that they’d like to see the evangelical movement become as broad and inclusive as possible. But that’s not really historical evangelicalism, is it? That kind of latitudinarianism has always belonged to Socinians and Deists and modernists and theological liberals. It’s antithetical to the historic principles of the evangelical movement.

But I’ll get off my subject if I’m not careful. There’s another common trait shared by many of the people on *Time* magazine’s list of 25. For the most part, these are the fad makers. These are the people who have designed the programs that are peddled by the out-of-control Christian publishing industry and purchased and implemented with little critical thought or concern by hundreds of thousands of people in the evangelical movement. Rick Warren, who heads the list, is the father of the hottest prefabricated program of the moment, “Forty Days of Purpose.” Tim Lahaye is co-author of the best-selling fad of all time—the “Left Behind” series. Packer and Neuhaus have been the prime movers in the ecumenical fad—probably the last bandwagon we would have expected evangelicals to jump aboard 20 years ago. Bill Hybels masterminded

the “seeker-sensitive” fad. McLaren took that to the next level with the “emergent church” fad. And James Dobson is the godfather of the “culture war” fad. (Too bad for Bruce Wilkinson that *Time* magazine didn’t do this piece two years ago when the “Jabez” fad was still hot, or he would have almost certainly made the list.)

Now, I have labeled all these trends and programs as “fads,” because that is what they all are. They are popular for the moment, but they have nothing to do with historic evangelicalism or the biblical principles that made evangelicalism an important idea. Not one of these movements or programs even existed 35 years ago. Most of them would not have been dreamed of by evangelicals a generation ago. And, frankly, most of them will not last another generation. They will all eventually fade and die, just like the Jabez phenomenon. And some poor publisher or wholesale distributor will be left with warehouses full of Jabez junk, Weigh-Down Workshop paraphernalia, “What Would Jesus Do?” bracelets, and Purpose-Driven merchandise (complete with the authorized trademark symbol).

Why has the recent culture of American evangelicalism been so susceptible to fads? Why are evangelical churches so keen to jump on every bandwagon? Why do our people so eagerly rush to buy the latest book, CD, or cheap bit of knockoff merchandise concocted by the marketing geniuses who have taken over the Christian publishing industry?

By the way, my background is publishing, and I love the historic influence Christian literature has made on the church. But the Christian Publishing industry has changed dramatically in recent years as Christian publishing has become big business. Companies once run by godly Christians, such as Zondervan, have been bought out by men like Rupert Murdoch and made part of huge secular publishing empires. And it has changed the face of Christian publishing. To a large degree, it is the publishing industry that fuels this bizarre hunger for more and more fads and programs.

And I have sat in meetings with publishers who have tried to convince John MacArthur to tone down his message, soften his hard stance on controversial issues, ignore things that are unpopular, and tell more funny stories. Publisher after publisher has tried to tell him he could broaden his audience and sell more books if he would just broaden his message a little. One publisher looked at some of his material—it was the series on the twelve apostles—they looked at it and told him, “It’s just too biblical.” I kid you not. They said it sounded too much like Sunday School material; they wanted more contemporary stories and hip language, and less Bible. That book was published anyway, without dumbing it down or removing a single Scripture reference. It was titled *Twelve Ordinary Men*, and despite the experts predictions, it stayed on the bestseller list for more than two years.

But that’s how all these fads are crafted. They are deliberately dumbed down, made soft and generic and nonthreatening, so that they don’t rebuke anyone’s sin; they don’t endanger anyone’s shallowness; they don’t threaten anyone’s comfort zone; and they don’t challenge anyone’s worldliness. That’s the way both the publishers and the people want it.

That is the culture the evangelical movement deliberately created when it bought the notion that religion is something to be sold to consumers like a

commodity. It created an environment where unspiritual and unscrupulous men could easily make merchandise of the gospel. It conditioned people to be like “children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting.” That’s Ephesians 4:14, and it is a perfect biblical description of the faddism that has overtaken the evangelical movement in recent years.

I first became aware that trendiness (the ebb and flow of fad after fad and “every wind of doctrine”—trendiness) was becoming a driving force in the evangelical movement some 15 years ago.

At first it seemed to me like the fads were a particular problem in the charismatic movement. Remember in the early 1990s, when “the Kansas City Prophets” were all the rage? And for a couple of years, it seemed, book after book on modern prophecy was coming out. There was a book called *Some Said it Thundered* that made the rounds for awhile, making the Kansas City Prophets out to be the modern-day equivalents of Agabus in the New Testament. That lasted until the most prominent of the prophets turned out to be using his gift to manipulate women into lewd behavior with him.

And then a guy named James Ryle wrote a ridiculous book called *Hippo in the Garden*. Ryle claimed God had revealed to him that the reason the Beatles’ music was so successful was that they had a special anointing from God, and he said God was going to release the anointing again. At about the same time, Wayne Grudem released a book attempting to give an exegetical and academic defense of that kind of modern revelation.

And soon, it seemed, everyone was confused about whether God is still revealing truth, and in the charismatic movement there was an unprecedented outburst of people claiming to have received all kinds of preposterous messages from God.

But that fad died out within a couple of years and was replaced by the next big charismatic fad: the “Toronto Blessing.” I could see the amazing impact—and the growing influence—these fads were having by the volume of mail we would get from people in our radio audience who wanted to know what John MacArthur thought about the latest charismatic fad.

The Toronto Blessing phase managed to keep the limelight for a couple of years or so. People would go to church to get drunk with laughter. It was a bizarre, highly emotional fad, and it was obvious from the beginning that it could not be sustained very long.

Then there was the Pensacola Revival, which brought an obsession with gold dust and gold teeth-fillings that supposedly appeared miraculously out of nowhere. And I hope you remember all of that. I’m not going to bore you with it. But I bring it up just to say that suddenly in the early 1990s, you could see this pattern of wave after wave of new charismatic fads. For a while, I was naive enough to think that this sort of trendy mania was a uniquely charismatic phenomenon. I never thought the whole evangelical world would get caught up in the same kind of fad-driven hysteria.

I did notice a very strange and surprising fact in the early 1990s, however. No matter how bizarre things got, the latest craze always drew in more people than the previous one. A lot of formerly non-charismatic churches were duped by the Toronto Blessing. That’s not easy to explain rationally. Why would a

church that had resisted charismatic influences for forty years want to affirm something as irrational and unbiblical—and over-the-top silly—as a room full of people claiming to be drunk in the Spirit, rolling on the floor and laughing uncontrollably?

But it shows the power of the fad mentality and the lure of a big enough bandwagon. If enough people do something, and it becomes popular enough, it doesn't matter how bizarre, unbiblical, or irrational it is, other people will always line up to get in on it.

Then these undulating fads started to spill over into the mainstream evangelical movement. The first big one I noticed was Promise Keepers. For about two and a half or three years, you were nobody if you weren't in on Promise Keepers.

I remember someone—a friend who lives in another part of the country—called me up to talk about something. Then before he hung up, he asked, “Will I see you at Promise Keepers?”

This was before I really even aware of the size of the Promise Keepers movement. So I was clueless about what he was talking about. I said, “See me at Promise Keepers? What do you mean?”

He didn't explain to me what Promise Keepers was. He didn't think he had to. All he said was, “*Everyone* is going to be there.” And it seemed like practically everyone was.

Then we had the “What Would Jesus Do?” era. Overlapping those was the Jabez phenomenon and the astonishing success of the “Left Behind” series. And suddenly evangelical fads entered a whole new realm. Publishers were literally raking in *billions*, not just millions, of dollars with WWJD jewelry, *Left Behind* books and their spin-offs for kids—and especially Jabez Junk. Coffee mugs, T-shirts, pens and desk calendars, wall plaques, and literally whole catalogues of Jabez merchandise.

The fads were suddenly bigger than ever, but they were beginning to look cheaper and have shorter shelf-lives than ever before. Last year's “Passion of the Christ” fad lost steam before the DVD even hit the shelves.

Then the biggest fad of all came, with its own built-in expiration date: “Forty Days of Purpose.” As of two months ago, *The Purpose-Driven Life* had sold more than twenty million copies, making it the best-selling non-fiction book of all time, surpassing *The Diary of Anne Franke* within a few months of its release. According to a news release I read in December, spin-off Purpose-Driven merchandize has generated nearly five million units of additional sales, and that's nothing to sneeze at.

“Forty Days of Purpose” is already the most successful evangelical fad in the history of the world, making a lot of people rich and guaranteeing that we're going to see a lot of similar marketing plans and 40-day programs in the months to come. Rick Warren has already announced his next one: “Forty Days of Community.” It starts in April, and you can get on the bandwagon now. The cost for a ticket to ride this fad is tailored to fit the size of your church. If you have a church of 100 people, it will only cost you \$700.

Now, I'm not going to try to squeeze a critique of *The Purpose Driven Life* into this seminar. There are plenty of helpful critiques available on-line, and one by our own Nathan Busenitz in the book you'll be receiving from

Crossway titled *Fool's Gold*? I imagine most of you have read enough of the book to have a feel for its style and content.

But let's set the critiques aside for a moment. Even if we had no bone to pick with the content or the underlying philosophy of *The Purpose Driven Life*—is this a really the kind of book that deserves to be the best-selling evangelical work of all time? Is there anything profound or original or exceptionally brilliant about the content of this book? Is it great literature, or especially superb Bible teaching, or excellent theology made understandable in simple terms? It's none of those things. The extraordinary success of this book stems from a very clever marketing scheme that targeted a specific market at the most opportune time. It hit the shelves at a moment when the evangelical culture was ripe for fads and stampedes.

The evangelical movement is filled with people who have been trained and conditioned and encouraged to respond to every wind that blows. Rick Warren thinks it's a good thing, and he compares it to surfing. You just ride wave after wave, and that, he says, is the means God uses to bring about church growth. In *The Purpose Driven Church*, he says this:

At Saddleback Church we've . . . tried to recognize the waves God was sending our way, and we've learned to catch them. We've learned to use the right equipment to ride those waves, and we've learned the importance of balance. We've also learned to get off dying waves whenever we sensed God wanted to do something new. The amazing thing is this: *The more skilled we become in riding waves of growth, the more God sends!*

Ah! so *that's* why we have this proliferation of fads. Evangelicals have gotten so skilled at surfing the latest fashions that God just sends more and more of them. And they get bigger every time.

I always think of my favorite Flip Wilson character, Reverend Leroy. Remember him? You surely remember his best-known parishioner, Geraldine Jones, whose signature catch-phrase was "The Devil made me do it." Reverend Leroy was the esteemed pastor of "The Church of What's Happenin' Now." In the '60s, that was funny. These days it's no joke. It seems like every church wants to be "The Church of What's Happenin' Now."

And that is an extremely dangerous position for the evangelical movement to be in. Today's fad may seem benign enough if you don't care much about biblical discernment. Rick Warren says he just wants to meet people's "felt needs" and insists he wants to remain biblical at the same time. Where's the harm in that? But that philosophy is wrong and unbiblical, because it's contrary to Paul's clear command in 2 Timothy 4, to preach the word and refuse to cater to the itch of people's "felt needs." Meanwhile, all these fads are moving us further from our evangelical commitment to the principles of *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura*.

According to the cover article in November's *Christianity Today*, the next big fad is already on the horizon. It's the "Emergent Church" movement—seeker-sensitivity gone to seed. It's Saddleback for postmodernists—Willow Creek to the tenth power, for the pierced and tattooed generation. The most influential people in the Emergent Church movement are people who have consciously and deliberately abandoned the authority of Scripture. Like all good postmodernists, Emergent Christians hate clarity and precision. They

despise authority, and they detest certainty. They say they don't want answers; they want mystery. They don't want to be preached to; they want a conversation. They don't want to have to judge whether something is orthodox or heretical, true or false; they want to create their own spiritual reality, and they want to be affirmed while they do it. Unfortunately, the evangelical movement has plenty of people who are willing to affirm all of those things.

At last year's Emergent convention in San Diego, one of the speakers, Doug Pagitt, pastor of an Emergent Church known as Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, told Emergent church leaders he is convinced preaching is no longer a viable methodology for worship or evangelism in a postmodern world. "Preaching is broken," he said.

Postmodern people don't trust authority figures. They don't want to hear someone stand up and expound the Word of God. It's unhealthy, he says. It's abusive. "Why do I get to speak for 30 minutes and you don't?" he asked.

He went on: "A sermon is often a violent act. . . . It's a violence toward the will of the people who have to sit there and take it."

Let me say this: That epitomizes the direction all these fads are moving. The fad-driven church cannot be a church governed by the Word of God. If you get your direction by seeing which way the winds of change are blowing and following the prevailing trend, you are being disobedient to the clear command of Ephesians 4:14, which instructs us not to do that.

The way the wind is blowing these days is not good. The doctrine of justification by faith is under attack on several fronts. In England at the moment, there's a huge controversy brewing because one of the most popular and well-known young British evangelical media figures—a man named Steve Chalke, published a book last year titled *The Lost Message of Jesus*. In it, he attacks the doctrine of original sin. He denounces the principle of penal substitution, suggesting that the doctrine of substitutionary atonement as evangelicals have historically understood and proclaimed it amounts to "cosmic child abuse." He insists that God would never punish His Son for other people's offenses. On page 182 of the book, he asks, "How have we come to believe that at the cross this God of love suddenly decides to vent His anger and wrath [against sin] on His own Son?" How have we come to believe *that*? I'll tell you how I came to believe that: because the Bible says so (Isaiah 53:10): "It pleased the LORD to bruise Him; *He* has put Him to grief. [He made] His soul an offering for sin."

The problem is, in the contemporary, fad-driven evangelical culture, almost no one is left who is both equipped and willing to answer a view like that. Someone decided several years ago that the word *propitiation* is too technical and not user-friendly enough for contemporary Christians, so preachers stopped explaining the principle of propitiation. Now that this idea is under attack, we have a generation of leaders who don't remember what it meant or why it's important to defend. And the overwhelming majority of British evangelicals have rushed to Steve Chalke's defense, claiming his critics are just overweening negativists who are behind the times and out of touch with this postmodern era. The leadership of the evangelical alliance in England are busy wringing their hands about the "tone" of the debate and the "unity" of their movement—and frankly if things follow the historical pattern, ultimately very

little will be done to stem the tide of heresy this book has already unleashed. (And you can be sure that the same ideas will be making the rounds of the evangelical movement in America soon. There are frankly already lots of people in American evangelicalism who are *eager* to challenge the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. This has been one of the main items on the Open Theists' agenda for several years.)

Something seriously needs to change in order to rescue the *idea* of historic evangelicalism from the contemporary evangelical movement. And here's what needs to change: A generation of preachers needs to rise up and be committed to preaching the Word, in season and out of season, and be willing to ignore the waves of silly fads that come and go and leave the church's head spinning.

Scripture is better than any fad. Preaching the Word of God is more effective than any new methodology contemporary church experts have ever invented. I don't care *who* thinks preaching is "broken." If we would get back to the clear proclamation and exposition of God's Word, everything that's broken about contemporary preaching would be fixed.

The nature of God's Word guarantees that. And that's exactly what I want to do in the time we have remaining in this session. I want to *preach* to you about the superiority and the excellence of Scripture.

Hebrews 4:12 says, "The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

That's a rich text, full of meaning, but let me take a few minutes to try to isolate what seem to me the three main qualities of the Word of God that are highlighted in this text, and let's carefully consider what they mean.

First of all, it teaches us that—

1. The Word of God is powerful.

The King James Version says, "the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword." *Quick*, of course, is the old English word for "living." I was surprised in reading John Owen's commentary on Hebrews that even though he wrote in the 1600s, he had to explain the word *quick* to his readers. He referred to the word *quick* as an improper translation, because, he said, "that word doth more ordinarily signify 'speedy,' than 'living.'" So I don't know when the word *quick* stopped meaning "alive," but it was apparently before John Owen's time.

I grew up in a church where we used to recite the traditional version of the Apostles' Creed, which says, Christ "*ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.*" And that made perfect sense to me. I figured "the quick" were those who made it through the crosswalk, and "the dead" were those who didn't.

But, of course, *quick* in this kind of context just means "alive" or "living," and that is what this text is saying. "The Word of God is living." That's the correct sense. It speaks of vitality, life, activity, energy. The Word of God has a life-force that is unlike any merely human book. It is not only alive; it has the power to impart life to those who are spiritually dead. Jesus said in John 6:63:

“The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.” First Peter 1:23: “[We are] born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.” James 1:18: “Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth.” Psalm 119:50: “This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy word hath quickened me.” “Your word has given me life.”

You can take all the great books and all the great literature in the world combined, and they do not have this life-giving power. No book changes lives like the Word of God. You might occasionally hear a person say, “that self-help book transformed my life”; or “that diet book was revolutionary”; or “that book on philosophy changed the way I think.” Rick Warren makes a promise in the introduction to *The Purpose Driven Life* that his book will change your life.

But the life-giving and life-changing power of the Bible is something far deeper than any other book can legitimately claim. The Word of God renews the heart by giving spiritual life to the spiritually dead. It changes our character at an essential, fundamental level. It transforms our desires and impacts us at a moral level no human literature can touch. It brings a kind of cleansing and renewal and sanctification that no other book could ever claim to offer. It resurrects the soul. It has the same creative power in the command of God when He said, “Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so.”

The Word of God is inherently powerful. It has a kind of life and vitality that is unlike merely human words. Proverbs 6:22–23 says this about the Word of God: “When thou goest, it shall lead thee; when thou sleepest, it shall keep thee; and when thou awakest, it shall talk with thee. For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light; and reproofs of instruction are the way of life.” And a familiar passage, 2 Timothy 3:16–17 says, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

No other book has that effect. It rebukes us. It chastens us. It comforts us. It guides us and gives light to our path. It preaches to us. It restrains our foot from evil. It frowns on us when we sin. It warms our hearts with assurance. It encourages us with its promises. It stimulates our faith. It builds us up. It ministers to our every need. It is alive and dynamic.

And the vitality of Scripture is eternal and abiding. In John 6:68, Simon Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.” The eternality of divine life is perfectly embodied in the Word of God. Again, Jesus said (Mark 13:31), “Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away.” Isaiah 40:8: “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.” Psalm 119:89: “For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven.” First Peter 1:25: “But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.”

Every page of the Bible has a life-changing power that is just as fresh as the day it was written. We don’t have to make it come alive; it *is* both alive and active. It is *always* relevant, eternally applicable, speaking to the heart with a power that is unlike even the greatest of human works. The thoughts and

opinions of men come and go. They fall from fashion and fade from memory. But the Word of God remains “quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword.”

And what is true of the whole is true of the parts. Every part of Scripture is alive and powerful. Proverbs 30:5: “Every word of God is pure.” Jesus said “Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” gives life and sustenance. That’s why Deuteronomy 8:3 says, “man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.”

I’m always amazed at the passages of Scripture that have been instrumental in bringing people to Christ. I’ve told you before how I came to saving faith in Christ by reading 1 Corinthians as a senior in high school. The passage that drew me to Christ is not one you would necessarily think of as an evangelistic text. First Corinthians 3:18: “Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.” But it rebuked my sin and turned me to Christ.

I have heard people tell how they were awakened to eternal life by verses from the gospels, the epistles, the psalms, and even some of the obscure parts of the Old Testament. I doubt there’s a page anywhere in Scripture that has not at some time or some place been used by the Spirit of God to convert a soul. None of it is superfluous. Second Timothy 3:16 again: “All scripture is . . . profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”

My friend Joe Aleppo, who is here this week, introduced me to a man in Sicily who came to Christ during a severe paper shortage after World War II because of a single page of Scripture from a Bible someone had thrown away. Paper was almost impossible to come by, so merchants used old newspapers and other scrap paper to wrap whatever they sold in the marketplace. This man went to the fish market and bought a fish. When he unwrapped it at home, one of the papers used to make the package was a page from a discarded New Testament. He read it, and this man who had been a lifelong Roman Catholic and had never before read a verse of the Bible for himself became a believer. That man’s conversion was the beginning of the first significant Protestant movement on the island of Sicily.

The Word of God is *powerful*. The Greek word translated “powerful” in Hebrews 4:12 is *energes*, which is the source of our English word “energetic.” It’s translated “active” in some versions, and that’s a good translation. It speaks of something that is dynamic, operative, and effectual. The apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 2:13): “For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which *effectually* worketh also in you that believe.”

The Word of God *always* works effectually. It *always* accomplishes its intended purpose. In Isaiah 55:11, God says, “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.”

Sometimes God’s purpose is rebuke and correction; sometimes it is

instruction and edification. Sometimes it is blessing; sometimes it is judgment. The gospel is “the savour of death unto death” for some; for others, it is “the savour of life unto life.” Either way, the Word of God is effectual, productive, powerful. It always produces the effect God intends.

That’s why preachers ought to preach the Word instead of telling stories and doing comedy. That’s where the power for ministry resides: in the Word. It’s not in our cleverness or our oratorical skills. The power is in the Word of God. And our task is simple: all we have to do is make the Bible’s meaning plain, proclaim it with accuracy and clarity. And the Spirit of God uses His Word to transform lives. The power is in the Word, not in any technique or program.

That’s characteristic number one of the Word of God. It is *powerful*. Here’s characteristic number 2:

2. The Word of God is penetrating.

Notice how vividly the writer of Hebrews portrays this idea: “the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow.”

The Word is like a sword—“a two-edged sword.” It has no blunt side. It cuts no matter which way you swing it. Not only that, but it also has a penetrating point. It is “piercing.” You can swing it like a saber or thrust with it like a rapier. You don’t have to be highly skilled to use it with effect. In the hands of an amateur, it will still work. And there’s nothing so hard or so deeply concealed that it can’t penetrate.

In fact, look at the verse again: the Word of God is “sharper than any twoedged sword.” No human instrument or worldly technique or psychological therapy is more effective than the Word of God to penetrate the human heart. It lays bare the true thoughts and intents of every heart.

I had a friend in college who was describing his efforts to evangelize a fellow student. My friend was convinced—quite incorrectly—that stealth evangelism is the best way to win people to Christ. So he was trying to be as subtle as possible and as delicate and indirect as possible while waiting for an opening to tell this non-Christian student about Christ.

He kept telling me about conversations he had with this guy, and how he was looking for some kind of “opening” to work the gospel in. This went on for months. And it seemed to me that he had already wasted several good “openings,” but he just lacked the boldness to bring up the subject of Christ. It seemed to me that he was waiting for the guy to be like the Philippian jailer and ask, “Sir, what must I do to be saved?” And I could see it wasn’t going to happen. So I said, “Why don’t you just bring up the subject, and tell him in the plainest possible language what the Bible says about Christ?”

And he said, “I just don’t think he’s really *open* yet.”

But you know what? We don’t have to be “open” for the Word of God to penetrate. It is “sharper than any twoedged sword,” and quite capable of opening even the hardest heart.

We need to have more confidence in the ability of the Word of God to penetrate people’s hearts. This is one of the real deficiencies in this generation of evangelicals. We don’t have enough faith in the power of God’s Word to

penetrate a hardened heart. And so some Christians—and even lots of churches—actually back away from proclaiming the simple Word of God to unbelievers in plain language. They think it’s necessary to have music and drama and other forms of entertainment to soften people up and prepare them to receive the Word. And in many cases they never do get around to declaring the Word of God with any kind of boldness.

You hear people today talking about “pre-evangelism.” I don’t know what that is supposed to mean, but usually it refers to some activity or technique that entertains people and tries to make them friendly to Christianity while carefully avoiding the risk of confronting them with the truth of Scripture—as if something besides the Word of God might be *more* effective than Scripture at penetrating their hearts. That is sheer folly, and it is a waste of time. *Nothing* is more penetrating and more effective in reaching sin-hardened hearts than the pure and unadulterated Word of God. All our human techniques and ingenuity are like dull plastic butter knives compared to the Word of God, which is “sharper than any twoedged sword.”

There’s a story in the biography of George Whitefield about a man named Thorpe, who was a bitter opponent of everything that is holy. He and a group of his friends—all of them young, rebellious thugs—conspired together to mock and oppose George Whitefield’s evangelistic ministry while Whitefield was preaching in Bristol, England.

George Whitefield had severely crossed eyes, if you have ever seen a realistic likeness of him. And these guys used to refer to him as “Dr. Squintum.” They called their little gang “The Hell-Fire Club,” and they disrupted meetings, mocked Whitefield on the streets and in public places, and generally tried to make his ministry a reproach in their community. Whitefield’s preaching had already made a deep and lasting impact in Bristol, and these young ruffians hated him for it. So this guy Thorpe got one of Whitefield’s published sermons and took it to the local pub, where the “Hell-Fire Club” was gathered to drink together while they make a burlesque of Whitefield.

Thorpe was apparently pretty good at doing impressions, and he had all Whitefield’s mannerisms and gestures down pat. So he stood in the center of this pub and crossed his eyes and began to deliver a derisive rendition of Whitefield’s sermon. But in the middle of the sermon, the Word of God pierced his heart, and he suddenly stopped and sat down, trembling and broken-hearted. Right then and there, he confessed the truth of the gospel and gave his heart to Christ. His aim was to taunt and ridicule, but he accidentally converted himself! Or rather, the power of the Word of God penetrated his soul and cut him to the heart. He became a preacher himself and quite an effective evangelist, because he knew so well the power of the Word of God to penetrate hardened hearts.

Notice that the Word of God pierces to the very depths, “even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” It probes to the deepest recesses of the heart, no matter how hardened or how closed the heart might be. In fact, *only* Scripture can do that.

Notice how militant this language is. It sounds like the language of armed conflict—swords and cutting, and dividing asunder of the joints and marrow.

It's vivid, destructive-sounding language—the language of warfare and devastation. And it is true that sometimes the Word of God pierces hearts as a judgment, without remedy and without any healing.

But I don't think that's primarily what the writer of Hebrews has in mind. In this context, he is urging his readers to examine themselves, lest they fall away from Christ before they have truly embraced Him with saving faith. He is warning them that it is possible to come close to Christ and yet fall away without entering into His rest—the rest that comes with redemption and the forgiveness of sins.

Verse 11: “Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.” And our verse comes immediately after that admonition: “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword.” He *wants* them to allow the Word of God to cut through their pretensions and their false professions and reveal the true thoughts and intents of their hearts.

And this is a reminder that there's a painful process involved in regeneration. In Ezekiel 11:19, the Lord describes what is involved in this process, “I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh:” Spiritual open-heart surgery.

This is the very thing that was pictured in the act of circumcision. According to Deuteronomy 10:16, it pictured the cutting away of the foreskin of the heart. Jeremiah 4:4 speaks of it too: “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your heart.” That's why the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 2:28–29, “he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit.”

That's the very imagery our verse in Hebrews 4 calls to mind. It's the cutting away of that which defiles. Circumcision of the heart. The Word of God is the instrument that makes this possible.

Painful cutting is often the necessary prerequisite for true and thorough healing. That's what surgery is all about. And that is precisely the ministry the Word of God has in the lives of those who genuinely know Christ. If you have never experienced that painful piercing of the two-edged sword, then you ought to examine yourself to see whether you are really in the faith. Because you cannot possibly know Christ in a true and saving way unless the Word of God has rebuked your sin and cut into your fallen heart and convicted and convinced you of your own desperate need of cleansing and spiritual heart surgery to deal with your sin.

And that, I believe, is the very thing the writer of Hebrews is speaking about here. It's a wholly beneficial thing. Although the Word of God is like a sword that cuts deeply and penetrates to the very depths, it is a necessary and beneficial incision that ultimately is designed for our own good. And for those who submit to the Word of God rather than resisting it, the cutting and probing of the two-edged sword always results in salvation, rather than destruction.

How can that be? you ask. How surgery be done with a sword? Well, that brings us to the third characteristic of God's Word in this text. First, the Word

of God is *powerful*. Second, the Word of God is *penetrating*. Third—

3. The Word of God is precise.

Notice how this verse describes the ministry of the Word of God as precision surgery, not wanton destruction: “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

Now, obviously, surgery is ordinarily done with a scalpel, not a sword. Scalpels are small and precise, and razor sharp—just like the Word of God: “sharper than any twoedged sword.” The surgeon uses a scalpel with great care to cut precisely, sometimes dividing fine layers of tissue with remarkable precision.

That is exactly what is described here. The Word of God divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and it is capable of great discrimination. It discerns “the thoughts and intents of the heart”—something that is not even visible to the human eye.

We cannot look upon the heart—the innermost part of the human soul. First Samuel 16:7: “Man looketh on the outward appearance, but [only] the LORD looketh on the heart.”

We can’t even correctly discern the thoughts and intents of our *own* hearts. Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” We are all subject to self-deception and blindness when it comes to judging our own hearts. But the Word of God reveals what is really in our hearts, and it correctly assesses our thoughts and intentions. It shows our motives and our imaginations for what they really are. And that is why it is capable of such precision surgery—even in the deepest recesses of our souls.

Some people misread this phrase “the dividing asunder of soul and spirit” and imagine that this describes two completely separate parts of the immaterial makeup of our beings. I don’t believe that’s what it is teaching. I realize there are good Bible teachers who teach that man is a tripartite creature, consisting of body, soul, and spirit. But I don’t think that’s the point of this verse. Scripture often uses the expressions “soul” and “spirit” interchangeably. It is difficult to make any meaningful division between soul and spirit, and that is the whole point.

Just like the “joints and marrow” of your bones and the “thoughts and intentions” of your heart, these things are so inextricably linked that it’s impossible to separate them without destroying one or the other. They aren’t separate entities that exist apart from each other. They aren’t distinct human faculties. There is overlap and interdependence. But the Word of God is precise and exact, and it cuts with painstaking accuracy. It divides what cannot otherwise be divided. It is sharper than any two-edged sword, and yet more precise than any surgeon’s scalpel.

Well, my time is gone. But here’s the point: We ought to make better use of the Word of God in our ministry, and ignore all the evangelical fads that come and go. After all, *only* the Word of God has the powerful, penetrating precision that is necessary to reach and revitalize hearts that are cold and dead because of sin. And this is also our clear biblical mandate: “Preach the word . . . in season,

out of season”—no matter which way the winds of doctrine are blowing and no matter how many fads and fashions come and go. Obey that mandate, and God will bless your ministry. Chase every bandwagon that comes down the road, and you will regret it on that day when you give account for your ministry.