

One of my favorite Christmas presents as a child was the Magic 8-Ball. It is a plastic 8 ball like the kind used to play pool. Inside is an [icosahedron](#) floating in alcohol. Each of the die's 20 faces has an affirmative, negative, or non-committal statement printed on it that can be read through a window on the bottom. Just ask the 8 ball any question and you will get an answer – up to a maximum of 20 answers of course. The lure of the magic 8 ball is the desire to know the future.

Of course, we know that this toy cannot predict the future but we do have something that can. The Bible contains hundreds of prophecies that predict the future. Most of these point to the coming Messiah and His eventual reign over Israel and the world from the throne of David in Jerusalem. That's what Christmas is all about - the fulfillment of dozens of prophecies as the Word became flesh and God expressed His greatest revelation to His people. The writer of Hebrews says, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." Heb. 1:1-3

But not all prophecy in the Bible is predictive prophecy. In fact, most prophecy is more about forth-telling that it is about foretelling. Old Testament prophets were sent by the God of Israel to "speak forth" a warning to His people when they deviated from His plan and purpose. Israel was chosen to be God's model nation, to set the example for the rest of the world of what a holy people should look like. When Israel deviated from God's intentions, the prophets warned of impending consequences for their failure to obey God's word.

So today, we no longer have prophets who predict the future but we, as the people of God, do have a prophetic role in the world. Every believer is called to play this prophetic role. This world is off key. Our culture is out of tune with God's standards. It is our calling is not only to point this out but to demonstrate what it looks like when our lives are in tune with God's standards. Some will see this as judgmental but think of it this way. If Jason hears someone sing off key, he calls them on it. "You're a little sharp/flat. Watch your pitch." Now if you are a grandparent and your three-year old granddaughter is singing, you are not concerned about pitch. Or, if you suffer from "American Idol Syndrome" and you think you can sing but you can't, you are not concerned about pitch either. But if you have perfect pitch and your job is to present quality music to the glory of God then you have a responsibility to tell a singer he/she is off key.

So, on this last day of 2017, I want to engage in a little prognostication and a little prophecy. I want to identify four challenges that I believe our church will face in 2018. I want to invite you to join me in being a prophetic voice in our world by pushing back on some unhealthy trends in our culture.

1. An increase in biblical illiteracy. In 2009, 45 percent of American adults read the Bible at least once a week; today that number hovers around 33 percent. A Lifeway Research study in 2014 showed that 40% of church attendees read their Bibles about once a month or "rarely/never." The number of Americans who don't recognize any books as sacred "has doubled in six years, from 7 percent in 2011 to 14 percent in 2016."

The cultural winds are changing direction in this country. At best, the Bible is still respected as a book of ancient wisdom but to some it is a compilation of repressive, man-made documents wielded by chauvinistic men to maintain power over others. Swarthmore College, which was founded by Quakers, is now offering a religion class called the Queering the Bible and another class called Queering God. The course description reads, "By reading the Bible with the methods of queer and trans theoretical approaches, this class destabilizes long held assumptions about what the Bible – and religion – says about gender and sexuality." Since there is no absolute truth, if you don't like a particular truth proposition – change it to suit your own desires.

A much different attitude is found in the scriptures. In Ps. 119:12-16, the Psalmist says,

"Blessed are you, O Lord; teach me your statutes! With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word."

In the NT, the apostle Paul says, "All scripture is inspired by God (lit. God breathed) and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness." The Bible is God's reliable, powerful and authoritative word to us. As such, we should make it a priority in our lives. We have access to absolute truth. Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free." Reverse the argument. If you are not free, then you do not know the _____.

You Christians look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilisation to pieces, turn the world upside down and bring peace to a battle-torn planet. But you treat it as though it is nothing more than a piece of literature." **Mahatma Gandhi**

What is your relationship to the Bible? Next month we will offer, once again, a training experience in how to know your Bible followed by a second training experience on how to use your Bible. BSF. Search Ministries – "Got Questions" January 11.

2. An increase in the marginalization of the church. The church will continue to move toward the periphery of American civic life. In the 1960's and 70's the church had a pretty good reputation and most people had some exposure to organized religion. In 1940's 5% of American people had no religious affiliation. These are called "Nones." Today 1 out of every 3 adults under the age of 30 have no religious affiliation.

The "Nones" are spiritual but not religious. They are not atheists. They are represented by people like Marcus Mumford of Mumford and Sons. Marcus Mumford is the son of church leaders in the Vineyard Church movement. His songs are full of religious themes but he declines the Christian label. *"I don't really like that word. It comes with so much baggage."* The nones are ditching content, ditching the church, ditching religion, but not ditching God. They are what Dr. Josh Packard, coauthor of *Church Refugees*, calls the "dones"—people who identify as Christians but have given up on the church.

Why? Millennials in particular are not content to sit in a pew and listen to sermons. They want to be part of the solution to the problem. They are interested in service and social justice but they don't see the church very interested in those things. We cherry pick verses from the Bible that support our opinions but don't change our behavior. We prefer to be right over being righteous. We are famous for condemning sinful behavior but just as famous for having nothing to offer those who are trapped by their sinful behavior. We condemn abortion but don't help young women who find themselves facing an unplanned pregnancy. We condemn homosexuality but don't take the time to come alongside and listen to those who struggle with their sexual identity. As a result, the church is increasingly viewed as a religious social institution that is all talk and no action, long on mad but short on mercy. We lose credibility with the world when we point out the flaws and the failures of others while refusing to embody the changes we seek.

I have always had a concern for those who want to serve but just don't know how. That's why on Feb. 11 we will offer a training experience called "Repurposed." How can I find and follow my God-given purpose? How can I serve the Lord where I live, work and play? What do I have to offer that will advance God's kingdom purposes?

3. An increase in racial and ethnic tension. Our nation is suffering from a serious case of identity politics. Today everything has become politicized. When people come to church and hear the pastor address any biblical topic they immediately put that preacher on a political spectrum of right or left. For example, a prayer for President Obama would signal I am a liberal who probably watches MSNBC and listens to National Public Radio. On the other hand, pray for President Trump and be branded a right-wing conservative nut who probably gets all his opinions from Fox News. I'll never forget the email I got that said, "You are doing Karl Rove's bidding." Or the person who left saying, "We don't know where Gary stands politically."

Racial diversity is not a political issue. It is a gospel issue. The way in which a church deals with race and ethnicity reveals a lot about how we understand the gospel. The gospel is good news but good news isn't good if you don't know what the bad news is. And the bad news is that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." So, it may sound trite but it's true - we don't have a skin problem, we have a sin problem. Racism fundamentally exists because of sin. Racism is an evil ideology of hate, which shows itself most clearly through violent or prejudicial behavior. That is why we need reconciliation. Not RACIAL reconciliation but reconciliation period. Reconciliation is impossible apart from the cross. When Jesus died on the cross, He not only paid the penalty for my sin but He united one-time enemies to God and therefore to one another. He made the two one. Listen to the apostle Paul:

"From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Cor. 5:16-21

The church needs to lead the way on this issue. We have a long way to go but we are going to make progress toward a more just and diverse church in 2018. This is a front burner issue for our elders who are not only listening to non-white voices but they are eager share their privilege and power with underrepresented minorities in our family. This will be inescapable in 2018.

We are called to be bridge builders. Bridge on our Concourse...

4. An increase in technology. I spent last week diving into the complexity of Amazon Firestick and HD Fire technology. The information we have at our fingertips is mindboggling. But for all the wonderful benefits of technology, there are some troubling liabilities. Our hyperconnectivity invades our personal space and we don't spend as much time thinking as we used to. We let others do our thinking for us. The addiction to social media not to mention the availability of pornography, continues to damage our capacity for deep personal relationships with real people. Facebook, Twitter and other online platforms are famous for spreading misinformation and providing a platform for hateful speech that does nothing to further God's shalom.

Chamath Palihapitiya, who joined Facebook in 2007 and became its vice president for user growth said he feels tremendous guilt for his part in promoting social media. *"We have created tools that are ripping apart the social fabric of how society works...The short-term dopamine driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works. No civil discourse, no cooperation, misinformation...it is eroding the core foundations of how people behave by and behave between each other. And I don't have a solution. My solution is I just don't use these tools. To see what's happening, it really bums me out."*

What are we to do? Ditch technology? Of course not. But we can put it in its place. Our culture has reversed the relationship between people and technology. We are to love people and use technology. I fear we have fallen in love with technology and we are using people. The key is to make time for solitude. Put down your devices and just sit and think. This is not a new problem.

"There are times when solitude is better than society, and silence is wiser than speech. We should be better Christians if we were more alone, waiting upon God, and gathering through meditation on His Word spiritual strength for labour in his service. We ought to muse upon the things of God, because we thus get the real nutriment out of them. . . . Why is it that some Christians, although they hear many sermons, make but slow advances in the divine life? Because they neglect their closets, and do not thoughtfully meditate on God's Word. They love the wheat, but they do not grind it; they would have the corn, but they will not go forth into the fields to gather it; the fruit hangs upon the tree, but they will not pluck it; the water flows at their feet, but they will not stoop to drink it. From such folly deliver us, O Lord. . . ." C. H. Spurgeon

I wish you a happy, healthy, purposeful, satisfying New Year. Our best shot at that is to commit ourselves afresh to the God who never changes. I once heard a man tell about his neighbor who helped him keep things in perspective. "What do you know Mr. Roberts?" "I know that this is middle C. The man across the hall sings flat the piano upstairs is sharp but this is middle C."