

V. The Church in Biblical Perspective
The Ekklesia: God's Church for the Ages
"His Communication—Our Lifelines"
Acts 6:1-7
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February 13, 2010 – Morning Sermon

This morning you found out why we stand here when we read the Bible, didn't you. Nehemiah says they all stood when the preacher opened the Bible and sat on the platform for six hours. I can't figure out how we got this reversed. Here is God's Word. We stand before the Lord for this is God's Word. This is not man's word about God. This is God's Word to man. Acts 6:1-7 says *1 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. 2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. 7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*

The grass withers. The flower fades. This is the Word of God. It abides forever and by His grace and mercy may it be preached for you.

This is our fifth study. We have made four studies as we have moved out of our 50 years of celebration, the Year of Jubilee and we're going into the next fifty years or until Jesus comes again. It's not sophistication, not ingenuity and we don't need to reengineer the church. We need to first go back and remind ourselves what God's church is. It is the Ekklesia. Then what are the basics? The first study we did was God's church, our home. God's church is what He has built. "I will build My church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." His church is our home. That's where we dwell with our Father, in the power of the Spirit, with brothers and sisters in Christ.

The second thing we learned is the church is centered upon Christ. It is His preeminence. Christ is preeminent in all things and that's our passion. We want to lift Christ up who is preeminent as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. If He is lifted up He will draw all men unto Himself and if He's lifted up He'll encourage the faint hearted. If He is lifted up He will convict those of us who begin to fall into apathy.

Now how do we lift Christ up? It is by preaching the Gospel. Our third study was His Gospel is our proclamation. I am not ashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile for in it is the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith just as it is written, 'the righteous man shall live by faith.' That's our message. So we lift up Christ. Our message is the Gospel of Jesus Christ that penetrates every text, every theme and every doctrine in the Bible.

Our fourth study was about His promise. His promise is the Holy Spirit. His promise is our power and in this study I want to take a look at what is actually the theme for this entire year and that is God's communication which is our lifelines. Our vision as we move into the next fifty years is for coming generations we want to be a church that reaches our generations in a way that the coming generations look like these covenant children you saw earlier in the service. They are the coming generation. They will be the elders, deacons, disciple makers and pastors. Praise the Lord. They are being brought to Christ and we want to see what they do.

Our vision is for coming generations, Briarwood desires to be a Christ-centered, Gospel-driven, Spirit-filled, EQUIPPING CHURCH. Why do we want to be an equipping church? It is because of our mission. Our mission is For God's glory, Briarwood is committed to **EQUIPPING CHRISTIANS** to worship God and reach Birmingham to reach the world for Christ. So if we are going to equip Christians we have to be an equipping church.

To be an equipping church the DNA has to have three things. We have to be Christ centered. Christ is the center, the sum, the substance, and the circumference of everything we do and say. Two, we have to be Gospel driven. The Gospel is the foundation (I'm saved), the formation (I'm disciple), and the motivation (It's why I live) of the Christian life. Then thirdly that means we have to be Spirit filled. The power of the Holy Spirit have to be upon God's people so that the fruit of the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit and the ministry of the Spirit is seen in our lives. The Spirit of God opens up the Gospel and bears witness of Christ. Now what is the result of that? We are an equipping church. What is the result of that? Every member is a minister and every member is a missionary.

Now, today here is where we need to be. How is it that we can be Christ centered, Gospel driven and Spirit filled? How can we ensure that? How can that be a reality? It is one thing to say that and it's pretty easy to say that. It is pretty acceptable in church circles to say that but how do we do that and maintain that? That's what we will look at today. God's communication system is our lifelines. Let's look back at this very crucial text in Acts 6. I want to bring something out to you that is really interesting.

Some of you have heard me say this but I'd like to share it one more time. I long to hear thirteen words in the Bible said one more time. It is found in Acts 17:6 which says "*These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also.*" The one who is saying this is not a believer. He is a pagan. He is not welcoming the church. He is frustrated. He can't believe it. He had heard about this stuff that started at Jerusalem, went to Judea and Samaria and now it is even come here. There he is in Europe, a frustrated pagan and this church that is moving throughout all the world, this equipping church who is sending people all around the world have come here also, to turn this one upside down which actually is right side up.

Humanly speaking there are some interesting points as to how we arrived there because you wouldn't have arrived at Asia Minor without the key church at Ephesus that planted about thirteen or fourteen churches. You wouldn't have had Ephesus without Antioch that sent out Paul and Barnabas where they were first called "Christians." You wouldn't have Antioch without what was happening at Jerusalem. In other words it went from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria. It went from the church at Jerusalem to the church at Antioch to Judea to Samaria and then to Ephesus. Then it was going to the whole

world and it will even hit Rome. Then there was Paul's plan to get to Spain from there but it wouldn't have gotten out there if it hadn't happened in Jerusalem.

There was a movement of the Kingdom in an equipping church called Jerusalem but there were some key moments. That was a church that Satan tried to kill with persecution in Acts 7 but before he tried persecution he tried something else. Satan tries two things. One he attacks from the outside with persecution and he likes to attack from the inside called penetration. If he can't penetrate the leadership he loves to penetrate the membership. Here he had penetrated the membership. Here is a church that started with 12, then 120, then 3,000 just counting the men, and people are being added every day. Then there were four to five thousand more just counting the men so here's a church with anywhere from 14,000 to 18,000 people at Jerusalem now. Satan will leave that alone, won't he? No he loves to attack it and he'll do it with persecution in Acts 7 but before he gets there he tries penetration. He gets some complaining.

There's an occasion that happens here. These people were worshipping the Lord. They were selling their properties. The resources of the church were overflowing. In fact, one guy sold so much property whose name was Joseph that they changed his name to Barnabas, son of encouragement. This is a church where the resources are flowing in with people, people ministering, people giving, people giving more than their tithe, people selling their property and it's amazing at what's happening. All of a sudden someone takes a look around and says "You know all that money going to mercy ministry? Well that ministry is not being done right. We're noticing that all the mercy ministry money for widows is only being given to the Hebrew widows. The Hellenistic widows are not being cared for." So there was a critique, a complaint. There was a mercy ministry complaint. Then there was a mercy ministry complaint about it not being administrated equitably. Then comes the kicker in which it was said that "I think our leaders are racist. I think they are partial. I think our leaders are bias."

Notice how they are all Hebrews. Whose widows are being taken care of? The Hebrew widows are the ones being taken care of. What about the Hellenistic widows, those of mixed race and culture? They are not being taken care of. One of the greatest exercises of leadership you'll ever see in your life is right here. The pastors, the elders of the church listened. They heard the bleeding of the sheep and they said "There is something wrong." They said, "We're doing mercy ministry but we're not doing it equitably. We have plenty of resources. They think it's because we're racist." Let me give you a behind the scenes of what I think went on. "It's not that we're racist but we're Hebrews and what widows would we naturally know?"

Now they are out there preaching, teaching and discipling. The mercy ministry is being done but it's kind of being done out of their hip pocket. So the squeaky wheel gets the oil, what widows would they have known? They would have known Hebrew widows. We need to do a better job of mercy ministry with equitable distribution but if we do that we'll have to back off of our preaching, teaching, our praying and discipling with prayer and the Word. Then they say something twice. "It is not good for us to neglect prayer and the Word to wait on, to serve tables."

By the way, they are saying a little bit more than we think they're saying. We kind of think of someone going around with a napkin on their arm and picking up dishes but the word table means more than that. It means bank. Do you remember when Jesus turned over the money changers 'tables'? He is not talking just about the tables the

widows sat at but he's talking about the bank of the church, the resources, the storehouse and that would have been the language you would have known at the temple. We need people who can handle the tables. We need people to administrate the church, the stewardship of the church and then to research the proper mercy ministry of the church.

So up come the first diaconates, the first seven deacons. They give the qualifications for them. They give a congregational meeting. The people say great idea and they select them. They ordain them and go to work with resources, administration, stewardship and mercy ministry. What is interesting is this leadership default that they made. They are not putting down mercy ministry when say this. When they say "It's not desirable for us to neglect the ministry of prayer and the Word" they know that every ministry of this church including mercy, stewardship, the gathering of resources, the administration of resources, worship, evangelism, discipleship and every ministry of this church is downstream from prayer and the Word. If we as leaders back off from our lifelines to the Lifegiver, Jesus Christ, of prayer and the Word there won't be any resources, any heart for mercy or any people to disciple. We have to stay committed at the core of this. Whatever solution we come up with we cannot neglect prayer and the Word. That's absolutely crucial and not to the exclusion of the mercy ministry but the vibrancy of the mercy ministry. It is for the vibrancy of worship, the vibrancy of evangelism, the vibrancy of disciple making.

We have got to stay in prayer and the Word in order to be Christ centered, Gospel driven and Spirit filled or they might have sung it this way. "Oh brethren let's do this mercy ministry but will you pray with power while we try to preach the Word? Then we will have a mercy ministry. In the meantime let's get the seven deacons so it is done right." Don't run by that last verse where it says "The Word kept increasing." The church kept growing spiritually. The numbers kept increasing. It kept making an impact statistically. Forget the pagan in Acts 17, Asia Minor, Judea and Samaria, because we're on the verge of a church split but the leadership says "Handle the problem and keep the lifelines open with the solution that we come up with." Boy what great leadership! That just gets me excited. You would think that the Holy Spirit must have showed up there that day. It wasn't like they said "Forget about the Hellenistic widows and just send us and email." No they said "We're going to get to you but we're not going to sacrifice prayer and the Word to do it. We're going to do prayer and the Word in order to do it right."

Now why would they come up with that? I think they came up with that for about four reasons which I'll give to you quickly. Number one they are just drawing off the Old Testament. In the book of Nehemiah the city of Jerusalem is in trouble and what's the first thing Nehemiah does? He prays. Then what did they do? As God blesses they pull the people together, get a podium, Ezra comes up, opens the book and they preach the Word. It is prayer and the Word, just go through the Old Testament.

Here comes Jesus because the Old Testament brings us to Jesus. What does Jesus do when He comes to do His three year public ministry? What was He noted for? He prayed so much His disciples said "Would You teach us to pray?" He was praying all the time. He goes to a garden and prays. He goes to a mountain and prays. He goes to a lonely place to pray. He goes out here and prays. He is praying everywhere. Prayer marks Him and what else marks Him? He came preaching the Word. Prayer and the Word is what it's all about. What are we? We are the church. We are the body of Christ.

So shouldn't we, body number two, do what He did in body number one which is prayer and the Word. I think they are drawing off of that.

Here is another reason why prayer and the Word is crucial. It is because that is how this church came into existence. In Acts 1 He told them that He would bring the Holy Spirit and for them to wait in Jerusalem and go to the upper room so they do. He has promised is Holy Spirit to be their witnesses through Judea, Samaria and the utter most part of the world. Acts 1:12-14 says **12** *Then (after Christ's ascension) they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. 13 And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. 14 All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.* Will you pray with power that we can preach the Word?

Now go to Acts 2. They pray with power. They go out into the temple mount. Acts 2:14-16 says **14** *But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice (another word for preaching) and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. 15 For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. 16 But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:* Then he gives his text in Joel 2 and it's quoted for you in Acts 2:17-21 and then he starts preaching in Acts 2:22. Acts 2:22-24 says **22** *"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— 23 this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. 24 God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it."* Then he quotes some more Scripture and continues to preach in Acts 2:29.

He keeps going. I won't read his whole sermon. In fact he doesn't get the chance to get to the life takeaways. They break in. He hadn't landed the plane yet so they just break in. They break in at Acts 2:37. Acts 2:37-40 says **37** *Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"* (Saying, "We want some life takeaways.") **38** *And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."* (Here's what I like.) **40** *And with many other words (he continued to preach because he had more notes) he bore witness and continued to exhort them. One might think, "Okay Harry why did you read this?"*

Here is a church and a couple of chapters later they are confronted with a crisis and they look back to the Old Testament and see prayer and the Word. They look at Jesus and saw prayer and the Word. They looked at their church which was conceived in a prayer meeting in Acts 1 and was birthed in a sermon in Acts 2. Over and over it is prayer and the Word.

Here is another reason found in Acts 2:42. Now let's look at the life of this church where 3,000 have been added. They went from 12 to 120 to 3,000 just counting the men so it's probably at about 8,000 to 9,000. Acts 2:42-45 says **42** *And they devoted*

themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Here is a church with evangelism where people are being saved everyday. They are having worship services praising God. People can't believe what's happening as they are praising God. There is people sacrificing, doing mercy ministry, loving one another, opening up their homes with hospitality and all of this is taking place. Here is a church that is worshipping, evangelizing, discipling, mercy ministry, loving one another, hospitality and what was it that primed the pump for all of that? Go back to Acts 2:42 which says *42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and **the prayers**.* Notice it is plural. It is the ministry of prayer and the Word. The ministry is the Word received which is the apostles' teaching. That is preaching and teaching. The ministry of the Word shared is fellowship. The ministry of the Word displayed is the breaking of bread, the Lord's Supper, where Christ and His body is declared which is the core of the Gospel in worship. Then there is the ministry of the Word returned as God's people prayed Biblically back to God over everything in life.

That's why when the crisis came they said "Solve it. We need to do a better job of mercy ministry. We don't know enough so we need to research more but therefore we need deacons who we can set aside to handle the resources and do all this." Why? "We have to stay in prayer and the Word." What is the result? The disciples kept increasing. Priests were being converted and then Antioch will be changed. Then Ephesus will be changed and then the Gospel will go all the way because this church had leaders that understood. The lifelines have to stay in place – prayer and the Word.

Maybe that's why one of the young men in this church when this building was built he was working on the construction crew and he came up to where the pulpit is now. About two feet in concrete underneath this pulpit is a Bible that was buried because he knew this church was built on the ministry of the Word and prayer. Maybe that's why when Dr. Barker was challenged by the elders of passing the mantel to me in 1999 that when he prayed about it all week he said "Well, I'm not going to take a fire place and hit him. That's not the mantel we're looking at." What's the mantel from our Elijah to our Elisha? He gave me a Bible and you can go see it in the history room in the church and the sermon is there that he preached that night. He talked about how it was built upon the Word of God and prayer. Maybe that's why while we were celebrating our 50th year last year you kept hearing that 'green chair' story. It has to do with the ministry of prayer and the Word which is at the core and life of this congregation.

So what are we going to do for the next 50 years and the coming generations? We'll be Christ centered, Gospel driven, Spirit filled and we want every member a minister and a missionary. We want to reach Birmingham to reach the world for Christ. We have to keep the lifelines – prayer and the Word. I have just a couple of thoughts about prayer.

If the ministry of prayer is a priority, then prayer is the Divine gift of speaking to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit concerning all the issues of life. What can I pray about? You can pray about anything and everything. I know we get excited when new things come out. The other day someone said to me “Harry did you know that Verizon has this new kind of phone and it’s only \$199.” I said, “Wow, cell phones, wireless, that’s great.” God has had wireless a long time and the signal never drops no matter where you are. You also don’t have to pay the bill for it. That bill was paid when Jesus gave His life and sprinkled it away clean, tore the curtain aside and you can go right to the Holy of Holies and talk to Him and say “Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed by thy name, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” That pattern prayer is there to teach us how to pray, how to make requests and bring all of that. The way has been opened up for us. So there it is that God has granted that to us and you can get a signal anywhere, just call Him. Philippians 4:6 says “*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*”

Notice how it always says ‘the prayers.’ I want to show you how this impacted not only the church that was planted at Antioch but also at the church of Ephesus. Ephesus was planted from this church where it went from Jerusalem to Antioch to Ephesus. The church at Ephesus fell upon difficult times so the Apostle Paul sent Timothy, his best guy, back to revitalize that church. What is it that Timothy dealt with to bring life back to a dying church? He didn’t re-engineer the church. He got them back to the basics. Let me show you this in I Timothy 1. Here is the church at Ephesus. They have fallen upon difficult times. In fact, what Paul warned them about as occurred. He had warned them that they would get false leaders and false teachers and they have come. So he sends Timothy after his first Roman imprisonment. He sends Timothy on a ministry of revitalization and he gives him a handbook on revitalization.

This is what it says in the handbook. I Timothy 1:3-7 says **3** *As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, 4 nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. 5 The aim of our charge (our preaching, our teaching) is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. 6 Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, 7 desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.*

Now I want to look at I Timothy 2:1-4 which says **1** *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. 3 This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*

So what is Paul telling Timothy? He says that if Timothy wants to lead that church back then he needs to enforce prayer and the Word. We have to get the right teaching in there and we have to get God’s people praying again. Prayer and the Word are first on the list. That is not something down the line after we finish the demographics of the community. God’s people have to pray and God’s people have to have good

preaching and teaching that permeates through the entire congregation. When it comes to prayer notice what he says in I Timothy 2:1 and Acts 2, the 'prayers' plural. We need to be a praying people.

In the ministry of prayer we have different kinds of prayer. We need to have prayers of adoration. We have prayers of intercession. We pray on behalf of people, on behalf of situations. We pray for the Sportsman's Blast. Seven men made a commitment to Jesus Christ at that event and others made a recommitment to Christ. Now we are praying for the follow up. We are praying with intercession. We are praying for our Mission's Conference that's coming up. We are praying for our missionaries. We are praying with adoration – Hallowed be thy name. You O God are great and glorious so we have prayers of adoration and of intercession.

We have prayers that are formal and informal. We have formal prayers like written prayers in the Scripture. We also have informal prayers and one is not more spiritual than the other, both are appropriate.

We have habitual prayers and spontaneous prayers. Daniel prayed in the morning, at noon and in the evening which are an example of habitual prayers. We have spontaneous prayers.

We have public prayers and private prayers. Jesus does not condemn public praying but what He condemned were the Pharisees who did their private life prayer publically to be seen by men. Public prayers an example being in I Timothy 2 and if I would have kept reading it would have said "I would that men lift up holy hands praying everywhere" (I Timothy 2:8). So there are public prayers and private prayers.

There is specific prayer and there is general prayer. When I was saved I made a general prayer of repentance saying "God I am a sinner and I am sinful. Please forgive me." Ever since then I have been pretty specific about my sins and sanctification. God here is one, let's go after it. Forgive me, let's go after it. We have general prayers where we are praying for the missionaries. We have very specific prayers where we pray for that particular missionary or this one or that one. We pray for the physical and we pray for the spiritual. We pray for the temporal and we pray for the eternal.

I want to say something here. This is a praying church and you are teaching me how to pray. I feel inadequate to saying anything to you but I want to warn us. It's easier to walk by sight than it is to walk by faith to be consumed in our prayer life with the physical and the temporal instead of the spiritual and the eternal. In other words, you can go to most prayer meetings and it sounds like an organ recital. We're praying for this person's lung, this person's kidney and this person's whatever. There are seventeen prayers of the Apostle Paul and we get general when we sometimes need to be specific. We'll say something like "God, remember the list." He's not going to forget the list but we may need to be specific. We may not need to be specific about everything but we need to be specific. We can also pray generally like saying "Lord, we pray for our country" but then I need to be specific where I can pray for my president by name. I want to pray for my judges, my governor by name. I want to be specific. So we're specific and we're general.

As I said, there are seventeen prayers of the Apostle Paul and Aunt Suzie's big toe doesn't show up. Would Paul pray for Aunt Suzie's big toe? Sure, he has already taught us. What did he say? He said "Be anxious for *nothing*" and that includes Aunt Suzie's big toe that's infected. "But in everything by prayer and supplication" but notice the

burden is on the spiritual and the eternal. I can pray for someone to get better and if they get better then praise the Lord but they're still going to get sick again and probably die. That is why I am burdened for their soul. That's why Paul says "I pray that the eyes of their heart will be enlightened that they may see the glories and majesties of the One true and living Savior." That's why we pray for the world to come to Christ and that's why he said specifically "I pray for my brothers, Israel that they will come to Christ."

Yes I can pray for the nations and I can pray for mine specifically. We have these burdens upon us so that we are praying this way. It's amazing what God will do. I'll never forget we got started in a modular unit. We out grew it and got into a metal gymnasium. Then we were outgrowing that and we needed to get some property to build a building. I called up this guy who was a friend of my mother's and I had gone swimming in his pool when I was kid. This man owned some prime land where highway 51 and Providence Road came together. I called him and said "Hey I'm Harry Reeder" and he said "Are you Ike?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "You swam in my swimming pool." I said, "Yeah." He said, "You're mother is best friends with my wife." I said, "Yeah" and I'm thinking this is going pretty good now." I said, "I'm here to plant a church." He said, "I heard about it." I said, "We're looking for land and I know you own some up there at Providence and 51." He said, "I do and I'd be glad to talk to you. It's about \$400,000 for a quarter of an acre. Bring your folks." I said, "That may be a little bit outside of our budget."

Then we looked at another one and thought this is the one. This guy wanted \$125,000 for his and that might as well been \$400,000 for a quarter of an acre. Then we found some that wasn't quite in our price range but almost. It was \$25,000 an acre but it wasn't good land. We had just about decided to take it and one of my deacons, Mike Terrell, raised his hand and said "I just think we need to pray about this. That would be okay if that is what God wants us to have but that \$100,000 land I'd like to pray about that for a while before we close the deal." So we did. We actually called a day of prayer and fasting for the church every Monday and the fast didn't go too long because two weeks later I got a phone call.

Here is the shortened version of this story. He said "You know that guy who was talking to me about that land?" "Yeah." "Are you going to put a church building on it?" "Yeah." "Are you going to worship in it?" "Yeah." "Did you know there used to be a church on this land when my great granddad bought it?" "No." "They burned it down because they wanted to open up a tavern and you couldn't open a tavern within a hundred yards of a church and so some guys came over and burned the church down so they could open up the tavern. I would love to see a church go back in there but there was a school too. Would you all start a school too?" "It's in the books to do a school too." "I'll tell you what then I'll sell you the land." "Sir, we can't afford your price." "No, no, I'll sell you the land at \$21,000 an acre and I'll carry the note." "Where do we sign?"

You have not because you ask not. I'm not talking about name it and claim it. I'm talking about going to God with particulars and casting yourself upon Him saying "God, here it is" and God loves the dialogue. He speaks to you in His Word and you speak to Him in prayer. You speak to Him as a husband, a father, a member of the body of Christ, a citizen. You bring your requests to Him with praise, with adoration, with specificity or general, habitually or spontaneous. You have formal prayers, informal

prayers. There are confessional prayers and ‘the prayers’ are all there. They are all in our life and God delights in it.

I remember when my dad was walking away from the Lord for 14 years and I didn’t know if he was saved or unsaved. I would go to God and say “God, I don’t know if he’s saved or unsaved so here’s the deal God. If he is unsaved, then save him. If you save him...” And then I began to list all the things that would happen. I highly commend to you the book that helped me in those days and that was Richard Pratt’s book titled Praying With Your Eyes Open. I began to reason with God like the psalmist saying “If You do this then this, this, and this and if he is not saved then go get him, convict him and bring him back and if You do then let me show You what will happen then God.” Now by no means do I think God was up there saying “O Harry is that what will happen? I didn’t know that.” But God delights in the conversation. Cast your cares upon Him because He cares for you, all of you, specifically. He delights in it. So the ministry of prayer is a priority.

Now here is this last point which is the ministry of the Word is primary. There are the sacraments, worship, fellowship and all kinds of means that God brings His grace to us but the primary means is the Word of God. The Word of God reveals the glory of the Triune God through the preeminence of Christ as the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Therefore in the Bible it tells us to read the Word and that’s why we have an Old Testament reading and a New Testament reading.

It tells us to preach the Word. “Until I come, give attention to the reading and preaching of the Word.” It tells us to teach the Word. It tells us to memorize the Word. “Thy Word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee.” It tells us to meditate on the Word. Therefore the Word has to penetrate throughout this congregation. It should start at this pulpit into the congregational communities into the small groups into the board directed ministries into the missionaries that we support. Everything that we do should be focused around prayer and the Word. They are inseparable. God’s providence is inseparable tied to His prayers. When God’s people pray, God moves.

By the way, everybody prays. I don’t know anybody who doesn’t pray. Everybody prays. The question is who are you praying to and how are you praying? I’ve met atheists and they pray. They get hit on the finger with a hammer and say “Oh God!” That’s a prayer. It’s not a good one but it’s a prayer. Jesus knows we’re going to pray but He knows what we have to do is to learn how to pray and that’s where the Word of God comes in to teach us how to pray. “You have not because you ask not and when you do ask you ask amiss to consume it upon yourself.” We pray self centered instead of God centered and Kingdom centered and others centered. So we have to be taught how to pray.

How are we taught how to pray? We are taught through the Word, when we read it, when it’s preached, when it’s taught, when it’s memorized, when we meditate on it and it is at work in our hearts. “How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, does not stand in the path of sinners, does not sit in the seat of the scornful but in His law he meditates on it day and night. He will be like a tree, firmly planted by streams of living water” (Psalm 1). So we want to read God’s Word, hear God’s Word, have it taught to us, memorize it, meditate on it, all of those things we need to have at work in our life.

Let me give you the takeaway. The takeaway is the equipping church is intentionally committed, whether its complaints inside or persecution outside, to the Divinely designed lifelines of the priority of prayer and the primacy of the Word. How do we know if prayer is a priority and the Word is primary and how do we maintain them? We will know it when we are Christ centered because how do you pray? You pray to the Father, through Jesus. If we teach God's Word Jesus said "You searched the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life but they bear witness of Me." So if we are Word centered and prayer centered we'll be Christ centered.

By the way, we'll be Gospel driven because prayer is calling upon God for the power of the Gospel to be at work in our life. When the Word of God is understood is the power of the Gospel. This is so exciting. The Gospel is all through the pages of Scripture. It's there in church government. It's there in the family. It's there in every sphere of life. We are in the Word and we're praying and that Gospel comes through. I'm getting so excited I can hardly stand it. Sometimes when you doing prayer and the Word it's like the Bible reaches out, you just need some comfort and it just kind of strokes your soul. Sometimes when you make some peace treaties with sin it's like the Holy Spirit just comes right up out of that Bible with His hand and grabs you by the throat and starts shaking you. Sometimes the Bible through prayer is a soft word, a still voice and sometimes its thunder to our soul, to our life. Sometimes He soothes us and sometimes He shapes.

You'll know when a church is committed to prayer and the Word. Christ will be everything. The Gospel will penetrate everything. It will be the foundation, the formation, and the motivation. The Spirit of God will fill those people because He is not being quenched but sought. He is being welcomed and He is there at work within them powerfully.

Charles Spurgeon the pastor of Metropolitan Tabernacle has about 10,000 people show up every Sunday. Here is a true story. One day six men were graduating from the pastor's college and before they went out they wanted to come hear the great Spurgeon preach in his pulpit because that church was on fire. That church was an equipping church on fire. They came and got a good seat so they could see the gestures and watch everything when the great Spurgeon preached. While they were sitting there before the service a man came up, kind of a dumpy guy and said "Are you all visiting?" They said, "Yeah." He said, "We're glad to have you." They said, "Yeah, this church is on fire and we just wanted to be here." He said, "We have a great heating system. Can I show it to you?"

Basically they thought they had a deacon who was going to show them the furnace. They said, "Well, we don't want to lose our seats." He said, "I'll reserve your seat. Don't worry." So he took them downstairs and opened the door. They looked in and Sunday school and church were to follow but the people had come early. When he had opened the door five hundred of these people were on their knees praying. You know who the dumpy man was, right? That was Charles Spurgeon. He looked at the young men and said, "This is how the fire comes to this place. This is our heating plant. Here is where the fire is stoked." Won't you pray while we preach the Word?

Do you think Satan's an idiot? He is defeated but do you think he's an idiot? Do you know how he can stop us from reaching the world for Christ? If he can break down our small groups and our congregational communities and get them off prayer and the

Word he'll do it. Do you know how he can get our Sunday schools, our congregational communities and our small groups off the Word? This is overwhelming to think about this. If he stops it in our pulpit then he'll stop it in those groups because this sets the thermostat. So will you pray with all your power so we can preach the Word where prayer and the Word will just permeate the congregation and the lifelines will be open and the river of Life will flow? Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together. God we long to see the world turned upside down. Perhaps you are reading this and you have heard what is on our hearts about attaching to Jesus Christ by prayer and the Word. You have heard the Word that Jesus has died for your sins, now by prayer all you need to do is come to Him and put your trust in Him as Lord and Savior. There are people here at the church who would be glad to pray with you but do make that prayer and commit your life to Jesus. Now Father, may I ask You that every father will lead his children and his family in prayer, every husband his wife, every parent their children, every small group leader to do prayer and the Word, every congregational community pastor to do prayer and the Word, every elder and deacon we must not neglect prayer and the Word. May this pulpit be saturated with prayer and may it proclaim the Word. Bring the life of Christ that we might be centered upon Him, driven by His Gospel with power and Father, filled with His Spirit. Thank You, we put no confidence in the flesh for it is the Spirit who gives life. Your Words are Spirit and Life, I pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.

The Briarwood Mission

“Our Purpose”

For God's glory, Briarwood is committed to **EQUIPPING CHRISTIANS** to worship God and reach Birmingham to reach the world for Christ.

The Briarwood Vision

“Our Passion”

For Coming Generations, Briarwood desires to be a Christ-centered, Gospel-driven, Spirit-filled **EQUIPPING CENTER** where every member is a minister and a missionary.

The Briarwood Strategy

“Our Ministry”

For Coming Generations, Briarwood will prayerfully seek to Implement the Biblical strategy of:

1. Gospel Evangelism and Disciple-making
2. Gospel Church Planting and Church Revitalization
3. Gospel Deeds of Love, Mercy and Justice
4. Gospel Leaders Developed and Deployed