

“Conversations with Harry Reeder and Bruce Stallings”

Part Thirty-nine

January 3, 2021 • Sunday Evening

This is our first Q & A for 2021 and I would like to say that this Q & A time will morph as we move further into 2021 but we'll cover more on that in our time together today. So devotionally I want to encourage you as we begin this new year with the noble-minded Bereans. It is said that they were more noble-minded than the Thessalonians which included people that were dying for the faith. What is more noble-minded? Acts 17:11 says [11] *Now these Jews (Bereans) were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.* In other words, they made a priority to hear the Word of God preached and to prepare to hear the Word of God preached. Then they personally got into the Word of God for verification, clarification and amplification. So they would receive the Word (the preaching of it) eagerly and then they would examine the Scriptures, note, daily to see if these things were so.

Why do I do that? Please don't take this as a plea from me to substantiate my calling in life but it does substantiate to me the importance of my calling in life and how I ought to conduct and embrace it, because I believe according to the Bible, other than your decision to come to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and is pretty much dependent upon what I'm about to say, there is no more important decision that you make in life than what preaching you listen to, how you prepare to listen to it and what you do with what you heard preached.

I Corinthians 1:18–21 says [18] *For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* [19] *For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."* [20] *Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?* [21] *For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.* So it's through the foolishness of the Message preached that we are being saved.

Paul said that he didn't come to baptize, although Jesus commanded that, but he said there was something more important than baptism upon which baptism and its effectiveness and faithfulness rests and that is preaching. Paul says in I Corinthians 1:17, [17] *For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.* According to I Corinthians 1 it is not just preaching but preaching and the Message that we are being saved.

Jesus said two things after giving the parable of the sower, which is the proclamation of the Word throughout the whole field, and one was to pay close attention to what you listen to. Then He said to pay close attention to how you listen. He also tells us to pay close attention to whom we are hearing. When all is said and done it says in Luke 6:40, [40] *A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.* I Peter 1:23 says [23] *since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God.* It is that the Spirit of God uses the Word of God preached for our new birth.

Then notice there is not only the perceptive, prepared hearing of the Word, but then there is the daily, devotional, studious, thoughtful meditation and reflection upon the Word for clarification, affirmation, amplification and application in your life. I like to recommend things that can be helpful to you as a habit of life and that is your daily time in the Word. One of my

favorite things to use personally is Morning Exercises by William Jay. Then I like to use TableTalk for family devotions, along with the use of the catechisms and the Scripture proofs in the catechism. Thirdly, I'd recommend reading through the Bible in a year or the One Year Bible. There is the chronological Bible you could use to read through the Bible in a year. If you want to read through the Bible in a year it takes about 20 minutes a day and three chapters a day. I like to tell Christians to do that every five to seven years but definitely get a good devotional book to do daily and then on Saturday family worship and personal worship ought to spend time in the text that is being used for Sunday morning and Sunday night worship. This is how you can prepare for the Word preached.

I would have to say in many ways 2020 was a blessing and in many ways 2020 was a challenge and overall I'm too upset to see it in my rearview mirror, trying to anticipate what 2021 will hold. That is certainly where I am right now.

Bruce: We certainly didn't see what was coming in 2020 and you almost don't want to try and figure out what is coming in 2021. I want to take this time to say there are many aspects of discipleship but one of the aspects of discipleship has to be the preaching and teaching of God's Word. I think many people try to put this in another category yet clearly there is life on life but it's in the preaching and teaching that the life on life gets established. One of the things I've thought about this year and seen different examples of is how your preaching and teaching ministry has disciplined us not knowing that a pandemic was coming. If you wait till the pandemic gets here and realize you need to get disciplined in some areas then you were way behind the eight ball. I want to give an example of what I've seen in this past year.

I've spoken to many different pastors in this past year and basically their church's dynamic as it relates to giving was, when their people came they gave but not other than that so giving didn't have a good anchor in discipleship and foundation in their walk with the Lord. We recognized at our church that our people committed to giving which is different than attending yet when they couldn't attend they still gave to support the ministries of the church and some ways in increasing measure.

Harry: I have received a number of phone calls from people who have said they couldn't attend due to health issues during this pandemic yet they were doing the best they could to stream the services online and they couldn't wait to get back. But they also wanted me to know that they weren't going to be there to place their gift in the act of worship but that they would continue to give and they were burdened to increase their giving, knowing that this would be a challenging time. That is such maturity and it was amazing to see. The deacons by God's providence had already made a mechanism for people to give online especially if they were going to be out of town or other reasons they couldn't attend.

Bruce: This is another example of the Lord going before us. I was in on those talks with the deacons about online giving and we never thought that we would actually depend on it or need it. One thought I had when you were talking about reading through the Bible plans for the coming year was the app I now have on my phone which is the ESV app. It's a wonderful resource to have on your phone because when walk, exercise, work in the yard or travel it has the spoken Word on it so I can listen to the reading of God's Word when I do those things. It really brings those narrative stories of the Bible to come alive to hear someone reading it. Theoretically you could listen through the Bible and digest it if you had some kind of plan but you would not want

that to replace the time spent studying the Bible with your hands on God's Word. The intake of God's Word is such a powerful thing.

Harry: Since it takes reading three chapters a day to read through the Bible in a year I would love to see a chapter from the Old Testament narratives, a chapter from the wisdom books out of the Psalms, Proverbs, Lamentations, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes and Job and then a chapter from the New Testament. I think doing it with those three chapters a day would be a good balance of reading through the Bible in a year.

Bruce: I have encouraged people to have a pre-sermon plan and a post-sermon plan based on what you shared in the devotional today for this Q & A. Our prayer is that sermon has application in your life but also include your regular time in the Lord as well.

Harry: Those verbal 'amens' during and at the end of my sermons are very encouraging but it's also great to have a lifestyle 'amen' which happens as you are prepared to hear the sermon and how to work that through on a Saturday night and a Monday.

Bruce: This past year we saw the Lord do some amazing things through our church during this pandemic time and we kind of did each thing just as it came. There were people in school from August to December and there were people who got the Corona virus but never did we have a hot spot or a spread that we were concerned about and that's incredibly encouraging to look back and see that. We had a functioning ballet and the hours that were put in by our staff to figure out how to do ballet while socially distancing. The reason wasn't because these kids must have ballet but it was because it was a platform of ministry in their lives. There were probably 300 to 400 people involved. It was just amazing to see what the Lord allowed us to do to engage in different ministry endeavors. It was amazing to see what our youth ministry was able to do. We came up with the phrase that we were going to 'maximize ministry within the safety protocols.' Quit fighting the protocols but embrace them and watching our members do that was amazing and miraculous.

Harry: I still am amazed that we were able to maintain mission and ministry in message. We were seeing people coming to Christ and growing in grace. We had missionary giving and sending. We had a national mission's conference as we anticipate the world mission's conference. Just around the corner is the Ember's conference. We were able to do Advent with safety protocols in place. There were always the critics on both sides but by in large most wanted to help see it work and the result was ministry continuing, mission continuing, message being proclaimed and God protected us from spreader moments and hot spots. That's amazing when you think of the youth ministry, the school, Birmingham Theological Seminary, the sports outreach ministries, and all our ministries. It was exciting to see how all our ministries thought through how they could continue outreach events within the safety protocols provided.

I have done three COVID related funerals, but two of the three didn't die of COVID although it presented complicated factors for other health issues they had, but I'm grateful that none of those cases were traced back to what has been happening here at the church. Most of the time it had to do with family and friends visiting. One of the reasons I wash my hands preventively is because I love my neighbor and I don't want to give my neighbor a germ. By in large people resist the politicization of safety protocols and then I have seen how we have been a

part of being able to influence public policy that the church and its mission is a protected entity in our Constitution for the free-practice of religion. In fact, the church is not only essential but it may be needed in a pandemic where the felt need may be even greater in moments like that because of what is happening to people in their business, relationships and their broken dreams.

My heart goes out to these high school students especially those in their senior year and all that but I was so encourage how BCS did all they could to honor the students. Even though we have had to go to more worship services we have had close to 1500 people attend on the Lord's Day within safety protocols. We have Sundays were people from every continent tuned into us except Antarctica. So I'm grateful for what the Lord has allowed us to do yet we realize the importance of assembling, mission and all of that. It is such a privilege to serve the Lord with leadership that is unified around mission, message and ministry but yet takes safety concerns in the state where it has valid issues. We will honor and submit to that. We're ready and so far we have been able to be salt and light in this and learn from it. So it's been an interesting year for sure.

Bruce: Around Christmas and since then I have heard from a lot of people that are homebound for medical and other reasons, they aren't getting out and about. These people are so dependent upon the live stream and are so appreciative of all we're doing to make things available online. One of them asked me this question; I invited someone to come to one of the outreach events we had so how do I follow up with that opportunity where I know they heard the Gospel?

Harry: I would say ask them so questions like – what did you think, what did you hear and have you ever thought about... Take that common experience of what you know what they heard and ask them about it. When you bring people to an event that is primarily evangelistic, like our drive-thru nativity or our concerts, it's always a blessing for us but much of what you can ask for follow up will be based upon what you said and asked before you brought them. Concerning the drive-thru nativity I have asked people tell me every time Jesus is mentioned and why He is mentioned in each scene or I ask something like that to get the conversation going.

I always try to find conversational moments, use questions and things like that. If you feel comfortable with social distancing to invite them over for a cup of coffee and dessert then feel free to do that. I have had a lot of follow up with people who have come to my office. I make sure safety protocols are followed so we can talk and work our way through this.

Bruce: I cheated this year because I had COVID during our drive-thru nativity and that's the first time I had not been to it but I had invited some people to come and they did. I actually was able to say to them 'since I didn't get to be there, tell me what you saw or what unfolded.' A friend of mine and I got tickled with each other because as he was telling me about it he said 'and then Jesus rode a camel to a house where the wise men came to see Him.' I said 'do what?' He kind of got the camel mixed up in there somewhere but it was great to have that opportunity to talk with him about it and one of the things that struck him, even though it would be commonplace for us, was I said 'you know that how narrative is in the Bible.' He said 'really?' So now one of the things he and I are doing is going through how this narrative is in the Bible and he is looking up the Scripture as it is really giving him validity to what he saw and heard at the drive-thru nativity. This has been the next step to the invitation.

Harry: I would love as we move into a new year as a people to really step up. Recently a great evangelist in our church went home to be with the Lord, Bill Buck and when things like this happen we need people to step up. Anyone who got in ear shot of Bill and me, there was the opportunity to evangelize and he would use the old raising of the voice and say ‘what do you think about Jesus preacher?’ I just got a little congregation here so let me preach Jesus. There are many things we can do in terms of sharing the Gospel. Again, find ways to use questions to follow up with people because it honors them and their opinion and it will open doors. If you get to ask two or three questions there is something they will say that will become the platform for you to share your testimony to get to the Gospel or to share what that meant to you when you saw it. You get the opportunity to say that one of the reasons Jesus came is so that we get to be born again and go to heaven. Jesus did it because there wasn’t a way which now means there is a way but it also means He is the Way – have you ever gotten to that point where you dealt with what Jesus said? It’s one thing for us to know about it but it’s another thing for us to know Him. That is what I’d encourage people to do.

Bruce: Communication went out this past week where we now have to shift to interim worship plan E. The Lord has really blessed us with a balance since all of this has happened and if we have to we’ll keep adjusting. One of the things that will change is instead of having this Q & A every Sunday evening we’re going to shift to having our Sunday evening service and then periodically using this Q & A platform as a part of that evening service.

Harry: We have received much feedback in thanking us for doing this and I’ve always wanted to do something like this but I didn’t want to give up Sunday morning and evening to do it so we plan to get back to the series I haven’t finished yet. Then we’ll be doing topical expository series of sermons to enhance the exposition of the series on Sunday morning which will be in the book of Romans. Those topical series will be anywhere from six to ten sermons and as we finish each series we will have a brief time of worship, some concluding statements and then field questions about the series. We will stream it but it will also be in the context of a live audience. The Advent season gave us a chance to find out how we could do a Sunday evening event but some other things we did on Sunday evenings like children’s choir will not start back on Sunday nights yet.

Part of this is adding back into the Sunday evening worship but enhancing our Sunday school zoom meetings and the opportunity to meet during the week. I really want to encourage people to get together in their congregation communities perhaps once every two weeks since we have the facilities to accommodate that so don’t miss that opportunity. Currently the 30 to 35 minutes children’s church has become 60 to 65 minutes so we plan to break that up to have the first part be like a Sunday school with a Bible lesson and then the last part will be the children’s worship part. This will take place at all three of our Sunday morning services for the children so they can get Sunday school and a worship time. We are opening back up the bookstore on Sunday mornings and see how we can continue this with proper safety protocols so that we can increase the hours of the bookstore.

We have been increasingly started adding things back with conscious commitment to loving one another well by providing a safe environment to the best of our ability. I am grateful for everyone who is part of the solution and part of helping us do it so we can maintain worship, discipleship, loving one another and evangelism because those things are so crucial. I’m grateful for the input of the elders and deacons for the formation of this plan and now the implementation

of it through the pastoral staff, the leadership, including elders and deacons, and just the people taking hold of it. I've seen these adjustments happening so many times now it's just a blessing to my heart and soul.

Bruce: If we can see this plan E as a global opportunity for everybody to maximize ministry but within the safety protocols then that helps us as a church to continue to move forward. We are getting better at embracing the safety protocols and learning from all the changes as we go along.

Harry: Please continue to pray for the school, the seminary, the sports ministries and all the other ministries and that our worship time on the Lord's Day will continue to be beneficial and safe at the same time.

Since the COVID vaccine has started being given out people have asked me about it so I would like to speak to that for a moment. There were 79 initiatives to do the vaccine and four of them have become predominant. I always ask my doctor if it's a synthetic vaccine or a live virus vaccine. If it's a synthetic vaccine then there is no history of fetal tissue engagement in the development of the vaccine, so then it becomes a personal decision that you make about getting it or not. I think it ought to remain as a personal decision. If businesses want to make sure their employees are vaccinated I think that is up to them but it's not in the church's preveue. Our preveue is to try and equip you to think Biblically and have a Christian world and life view on medical issues that is preventive, curative and palliative within the framework of Biblical ethics. It would be a personal and family decision that you make.

People want to know if I will take the vaccine or not. I have no problem with taking it. I get the flu shot and so I'll do this one. I also know we have a limited amount of the COVID vaccines and they haven't done it for pregnant women or children because they haven't tested that yet. They are just starting to test this group of people. I will wait until health care workers have had their opportunity to get their vaccine before I get mine because I really want them to get theirs, but I have no problem of taking it personally. I do understand how people have differing convictions on this though. For whatever it's worth, I think ultimately that the virus camp down awaits "herd immunity" vaccine, with those two things working together. People have wondered when I see more normal relief and I'm not a prophet or a son of prophet, but my guess is probably late spring or early summer.

As a church we keep pressing back and pressing forward and the only way we are able to do that is we are helping each other get there so that we can make sure Christ's church has a prevailing ministry in society and the crisis becomes an opportunity for us to show our confidence in the Lord, our love for one another and our love for our neighbor.

Bruce: That's all we have time for, so Happy New Year. We look forward to serving the Lord with you during this year and may He be glorified in all that we do.