

On to Maturity

**Boston Church Congregational Devotional
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I love the Boston church where I have raised my four children for the last 16 yrs through kid's kingdom, preteen, teen and campus ministries. One has been married here and has presented us with a nine-month-old grandbaby, Emma! The Boston church has been good to me and my family and I am very grateful for every disciple, teacher, ministry leader, discipleship partner and friend the Shaw family has encountered in our 16-year history.

All has not been perfect or without pain created both by us and others, but all has worked together for good. We have been brought safely thus far by the grace of God and love of the members of this church. My main focus tonight is on Emma. What will the Boston church be for her. And not only my grandkids but each of yours.

We stand at a critical and exciting juncture in determining the future of the church and eternal destiny of not only ourselves but the Emmas born or yet to be born in our families and those of the world. The heart of all your elders and this elder is that the Boston church of the future become a more mature more healthy and more exciting place for all the Emmas of our future. My greatest fear as a man, an elder and an evangelist is that Emma experience a dying church in decline instead of a vibrant healthy and passionate church of worldwide impact.

I grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina, known as the city of churches. I attended many of them and saw them become monuments of brick and mortar void of young people, passion, impact and attraction. I have now been in the ministry for almost 30 years and seen or experienced membership and leadership in everything from good to bad to ugly in terms of church dynamics. I went to the University of Florida and was converted at the Crossroads church at the height of its dynamism and growth as a model of campus ministry for the Churches of Christ. It grew from 225 to over 1000 in less than five years. I also watched as it lost it's leadership and declined over the next 10 years to a church of less than 200.

When a church is declining it invariably loses its vision for saving the lost, its passion for loving one another deeply and from the heart and its commitment to Jesus as Lord of all and for all in its membership. Cynicism, bitterness and apathy gain strong footholds in the membership and faith, hope and love become hard to find in more than a few. Young people tire of hearing how it was or why we can't be fired up and excited now and soon only the older members remain with wounded agendas and stories of why we must be careful to not get carried away again.

I will not be an elder, evangelist or member in such a church nor have my grandchild raised in such. I don't want any of you to raise your kids or grandkids in such a church. I do not believe that is where the Boston church is tonight and your elders, evangelists and teachers are determined that it not go in that direction. We are equally determined

that it move forward from where we have been for the last year. It was September 14 last year we first addressed issues of repentance and our intention to change some practices that God brought to our attention in various ways.

- There is no longer a structure of ICOC central government or a New England-Europe world sector central oversight. The Boston church is subject only to its own elders evangelists and membership within. It is our choice to be voluntarily involved in forging brotherhood relationships that promote the spread of the gospel, unity of fellow disciples and growth of our churches.
- The former overseeing team in Boston has been replaced by a seven-man group of elders striving to develop team leadership for the Boston church along with the evangelists, teachers and other non-staff leaders who share the leadership loads.
- We plan to see more elders and deacons appointed in the church and regions according to Biblical qualifications and a reasoned process for appointment.
- We are in process of reviewing our financial compensation of staff, as you just heard and will always have non-staff board members, along with the elders, reviewing compensation policy as we move forward.
- We have moved to a “one pot” system of all-church finances with the deliberate aim of allowing the elders to oversee both revenue and expenses and to more effectively manage our money. This will take more sharing of resources for the good of the whole church and yet provide a more realistic means to build up the whole body of Christ throughout the Boston area.
- We are also revising our first principal studies to more accurately reflect Biblical teaching on some of them. This task will be given to a group of elders, evangelists and teachers with the conclusions then presented to each region.
- We are implementing a monthly bulletin from the elders to be edited by Tom Jones and available as a more reliable communication process for all church news, events and expectations. This will be distributed at region services.
- We will be committing \$100,000 to the support of the HOPE *worldwide* corporate office in 2004 to help enable it’s survival as a facilitator of disciple-staffed efforts on behalf of the poor.
- We have implemented a church-wide program of textual Bible study in every region effective this fall.
- A sincere effort has been made to forge more mature and supportive relationships with all of the outlying churches in New England which sprang from or became part of the Boston church at some point in our history. These now include the churches in Worcester, Springfield, Rhode Island, Groton-New London, Hartford, New Hampshire (The Granite State Church), Portland (ME) and Burlington (VT). The same can be said of our relationships with church plantings from Boston in western, central and eastern Europe.

These are just some of the changes that have been or are in process of being made in our teaching, structure or practice. As believers in a restoration mindset we will never finish restoring our beliefs and practices to a point of perfection but are committed to the ongoing pursuit of maturity in Christ. We believe we serve and worship a God of grace who disciplines us for our own good, forgives us of our sins and encourages and strengthens us in our efforts to go on to maturity. We praise and thank him for that and are ever more thankful for his love and grace. We believe God wants us to move the church forward as a more mature leadership and membership.

To move forward is the call of your elders tonight. We want to be clear and unmistakable in that message. I have two points as I speak for the elders and make that call forward.

1. Our heart and responsibility as elders (Acts 20:17-21).

Our heart is to carry out the charge Paul gave some of the first elders those of the Ephesian church in Acts 20. Our heart is to serve you as we move forward with humility and tears after the example of Paul who raised up these men. As we have with our own children, we want to be with God's family, holding the role of leadership and authority given us from a posture of tears for our own sins when they hurt you and respect for your input when you are helping us see the church from where you live. We want to have the humility to continue to listen and are implementing times for the elders to sit at your region or "city gates" as it were so we can consistently stay in better touch with God's family in Boston. Some of us will be available in each region for dialogue, questions and input on a scheduled basis. We want to be shepherds who know and are among their sheep not just in name or title but in real life and fellowship.

Also, in keeping with this passage, our conviction is that it is our responsibility to see to the preaching and application of the whole will of God to every member of our church family. As we move forward it is our deep conviction the Boston church must have a total menu of the diet found in God's word not just part of it. We intend for those who speak to the church to be neither short order cooks who package the same ingredients 50 different ways or another extreme of Burger King-style "have it your way" messages to please people and say what their itching ears want to hear.

The power and spiritual health of this church are in the word of God and not the mechanics of ministry. We need ministry forms of structure that facilitate the application of the directives and functions of God found in his word. Paul says he worked publicly and house to house to get the word of God applied to the life of the disciples in Ephesus. Whether publicly in region services, house to house in small groups or family settings, and one-on-one, we are driven by the reality that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

We do not intend to be authoritarian in our leadership but are absolutely committed to the authority of the Bible as the standard, first for our own lives, then for each of yours. We have no choice, if we are to be faithful to God or to you as spiritual leaders accountable for your souls as well as our own.

Hebrews 13:17 says "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work may be a joy and not a burden for that would be of no advantage to you." The Bible says spiritual leaders will be held accountable for keeping watch over the souls of the members we shepherd. That is a weighty responsibility and much of the motivation for the changes we have and are making. It also demands we have a means of knowing how every member of the Boston church is doing spiritually, physically and emotionally.

For that purpose we want to clearly state tonight that we expect every member of the church to be in a small group setting and to be devoted to the fellowship being developed there. This is how we can be sure attention can be given and Bible directives and

functions can be facilitated in an orderly an organized way as a spiritual family unit. (This would include, but not be limited to, evangelistic efforts, Bible study, prayer and discipling.) We are committed to drawing on the wealth of maturity found in many of our older disciples to lead such groups with ongoing training and support from ministry staff and the elders.

While being clear we are asking every disciple to function in a group to assist in the shepherding and facilitating of Bible function we also want to emphasize the family dynamic each disciple should feel, experience and contribute to. At a recent small group leaders meeting in the Northwest region, I closed the meeting asking people to share their favorite memories of past family groups. Stories began to come from their hearts of trips taken together, special baptisms that were the fruit of group outreach, prayer and Bible study and fun ways disciples had bonded, loved and helped each other grow in Christ. Those are the experiences we want to ensure every disciple shares together as we move forward together.

Biblical Christianity must be experienced together with people on a day-to-day basis. We are to be known for our love and that must be shared shown, given and received in intimate settings beyond our worship services and large gatherings such as this one. Our goal is to cultivate these groups by the word of God, spiritual direction and the contribution of every disciple. Further teaching and direction for the development of healthy, loving and productive groups will be given in each region as we move forward.

Another aspect of our heart is to not hesitate in calling every disciple to the obedience of their faith in Jesus and the word of God. Spiritual leadership of God's family like our physical families takes humility and courage, it takes care and concern but also decisiveness and determination. We will not hesitate to preach and teach the whole will of God but also to apply it first to ourselves but then also every disciple. I was once fired from a preaching job and the reason given by the elders was "It's not what you preach that bothers people, Wyndham. It's that when you come out of the pulpit you expect people to do it." Let it be understood that all seven of the elders of the Boston church believe that is the only way to lead this church. We will fully support and expect that every disciple of the Boston church not only believe the Bible but expect to put it into practice. The only people asked to leave this church will be those who after patience and careful instruction demonstrate that they do not want to put the Bible into practice in either heart, attitude or action. We will not become a church that waters down or compromises the truth of God's word and his expectation that all of us obey it. It is not our heart to leave anyone behind but to move together as a family equally committed to pleasing our father and helping each one to go to heaven.

2. Our second focus tonight is the direction of the Boston church as we move forward.

Turn in your Bibles to Hebrews 12:1-4. The Hebrew writer was addressing disciples like those in the Boston church many of whom were veterans of many spiritual battles over many years. They were not new to the faith but rather needing to keep and renew their faith. His call, as they moved forward, was to greater maturity as stated in chapters 5 and 6. In chapter 12 he gives the key to greater maturity then and now and that is to focus on Jesus.

Tonight I cannot, nor could all seven of us if we preached for hours, address every situation, question or feeling in this room about the past or the future. The Hebrew writer had a similar dilemma as he wrote to our fellow disciples in his day. His call of direction was to fix their eyes on Jesus as they ran the race, moved forward with perseverance in the race marked out for them. Then and now it is really all about Jesus.

He is the measure of a man or woman, a family, a church. He is the true north, the pioneer, the bright and shining star guiding each of us as his disciples and as a church of disciples into our future. I want to close with three characteristics of Jesus we all need to aim for and measure ourselves by as members of this church. A healthy disciple and a healthy church will remind everyone who knows them of Jesus. As we move forward Jesus is the model of maturity we need to strive for, pray for, study for and help each other toward.

First, we must focus on Jesus' purpose. Jesus stands out as he lived in this world in that he always was driven by his purpose. Broadly he defined that in John 8: 29 as "I always do what pleases my Father." Specifically his purpose is defined in Luke 19:10 as coming to seek and save that which is lost and 1 Timothy 1:15 as coming into the world to save sinners.

Jesus life was lived for a purpose and so must ours as individual disciples and as a church. We exist as Christians to always seek to please our Heavenly Father, and to do what we can to save sinners.

I was fishing with friend I met several weeks ago. He said, "I like your church. My church was boring, and I didn't understand what was going on. I like the way you use the Bible. I need to know more because I am ready to set my goals for life. I know I need God and church and it should really mean something." People are as in need of and ready to be saved today as when you were met and studied with. Are your eyes fixed on Jesus and his purpose as you run your race?

This church has always been known for the purpose of Jesus—the deep conviction that we are saved sinners seeking to save other sinners. As we move forward we must keep our eyes on Jesus and his purpose and make it our own.

Second, we must fix our eyes on the passion of Jesus and move forward with passion in our own lives. It was said of Jesus' zeal for his Father's house consumed him. Fenway Park on Thursday night was filled with passion for Red Sox Nation. The fans, the players, the owners and managers were fanatics about winning the "wild card." You would have thought we won the World Series. They got there early and stayed late. They sang "God Bless America," they stood for many of the at bats and hugged everyone around them when good things happened. The church should be far more zealous for Jesus and his nation, his cause his family than we are for the Red Sox. I am a Red Sox fan. I love them, root for them, but I love God, Jesus and this church far more than the Red Sox. A healthy church is a passionate church that gets there early, stands up and sings and hugs and prays and encourages everyone around us to love Jesus. To love God and to run the race not for the wild card but for the heaven card.

We all have passion for something. The question as we move forward is where is mine placed. Passion can be misplaced or spiritually placed. There are really only two options

according to Jesus. He placed his in pleasing God his Father and said the first and greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart soul mind and strength. That command says we all have to place our passion in God. It is about zeal for his house and being about our Father's business. All of us are placing our passion somewhere right now. The past in the church with all its challenges and tests for us all has sifted our hearts. That's why I am so sure it is of God.

I believe there are at least three ways some of us have responded to God's test of our hearts.

- There is a large portion that has responded like Jesus and kept his purpose and passion for God, the mission and his church. I praise God for so many who have encouraged me, convicted me and inspired me over the last year. Guys like Ken Lowey who sends me a birthday card and expresses his love appreciation and encouragement, Fred Faller who walked around the Burlington reservoir with me for an hour as we prayed for each other, for the Boston church, for the growth God is calling us all to mature in. I think of Jan Blough who as a spiritual mom to me always gives me big hugs and tells me to be strong and do what God would have us do. There is Mike Hammonds who leaves me messages and says, "Don't get discouraged; God is taking us to better and better places." There is Dave Malutinok who just calls me his friend, and John Martin who says, "Reach for the sky in building this church." And then there are many more I or you can name who are voices of reason and pillars of strength. The elders praise God for all who have persevered, held your spiritual ground and kept your spiritual fervor. We commend you we need you and we do not take your commitment for granted.
- I think there is another group in the church that has been tempted with taking some time off from making Jesus Lord while the storm is passing over. We get tempted to seek other masters, place our passion in job, recreation, sports, personal gratification versus spiritual gratification. I understand the temptation, I can relate to the pull of other things especially when the church has been distracted. But it is not right for me or any of you. It is not healthy, and it is down right dangerous. Complacency is like a drug—you get addicted to it before you know it. We stop praying regularly; we stop reading our Bible to be convicted or inspired; we start missing services or times with our family group and say "Well, I do have my freedom now." That is true, but exercise of freedom always reveals where our heart is. It shows what we really value and what we really are passionate about. The question is not whether we are free or not it is where your heart is. Complacency has to be repented of; passion has to be deliberately placed. When I look and listen to Jesus he says love God with all your heart soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself. I want to call us all to check our hearts tonight and our passion. After Jesus, we can enjoy and be excited about the Sox, the Patriots, golf or anything else we enjoy, but it still is true if Jesus is not Lord of all he is not Lord at all! That is still as true today as it ever has been and always will be.
- The third place some of us are is bitter, disillusioned, resentful. We have been hurt, but we have not chosen to respond like Jesus. The Hebrew writer reminds us all none of us have run the obstacle course that Jesus did because we have not

yet shed our blood. I believe disillusionment comes from misplaced faith. We have trusted in people, the fellowship, the past success of our church and when one or all lets us down we blow up, bow up or give up. Look at Jesus he suffered more let downs from people, in the world and from his disciples, but he did not get disillusioned. I believe bitterness comes from pain not spiritually responded to. We all have been hurt, will get hurt and many times from places or situations we least expect it. But we must trust God like Jesus did, not retaliate like Jesus did and learn in a deeper way why God is the only friend that is totally reliable. There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus" includes our family, fellow disciples, co-workers and best friends. Bitterness is the absence of forgiveness ultimately and sooner or later we have to see that we are the only source of our bitterness no matter who was the source of our pain. We are taught by Jesus to forgive as we have been forgiven, to trust God to see justice done not try to get it ourselves.

Some of us are stuck in these last two places I have talked about, and we do not want to leave you behind. We do want to pray for you, talk with you and plead with you to leave the bitterness and disillusionment behind as together we go on to maturity. I am not seeking to belittle you or look down on you, I can relate to you, but I cannot condone your staying in these places. They are first of all harmful to your spiritual welfare and. Secondly, they threaten the health and vitality of the church. The elders have addressed many of these issues in ourselves, the staff and for your sake and the sake of the church we must address it as seen in any of our members.

Finally, when we look at Jesus, we see his peace. Jesus handled more turmoil in three years of his adult ministry than any of us in a lifetime. That's why he is our example our mentor our model. In John 14:27 he tells the first disciples as well as us today "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid." This is a sweet promise to me and each of us as we look to Jesus and move forward. I recently took my youngest daughter Kristen to start a new job as a teen ministry leader for the Chicago church. She and we were both excited at her new adventure and tempted to be a bit afraid of her moving forward. The presence of God being in her through the Holy Spirit which she got at baptism and watching over her because of my prayers and hers is really the ultimate and only basis for peace. But it is more than sufficient because God is a God of grace and peace.

His nature is to prosper her and us and not to harm us. His grace is sufficient for all her needs and all my needs and all of your needs. Many have asked me how I feel about Gordon leaving. I feel sad, but I also am realizing it pushes me more to the presence and peace that comes solely from God. It will mature me as it forces me to see that his grace is sufficient for all my needs. Jesus peace is not the absence of pain or challenge or fear. It is the place you get to when you are forced to realize his grace and his presence are really what gets you through and can get every one of our friends neighbors and family through.

He does not force it on us he offers it to us and places us in situations that force us to decide what we will rely on and trust him or something or someone else. I have been pushed toward Jesus and his grace more in this last year than ever, and I want to fix all of our eyes on him and God's grace as we move forward. Life as a disciple is truly an adventure, a roller coaster ride of thrills and spills. It is a race that requires perseverance from us all but the destination is more than worth the blood, sweat and tears.

I recently saw a video on the agony of defeat and the thrill of victory. It showed some of the worst spills endured between or before the thrills. Skiers, gymnasts and race car drivers experienced defeats but went on to enjoy the thrill of victories. Our call tonight is that every disciple will endure the agony of defeat spiritually as we run the race. But because of God's grace, it is only a spill, and we can, by God's grace, get up and run again.

I close with a great quote from former President Teddy Roosevelt:

“It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by the dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions and spends himself in a worthy course; who at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who, at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly; so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory or defeat.”

Let us be in the arena. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus. Let us go on to maturity!