

Pastor's Papers | Ronald H. Gann
Ministry/Church

Theology vs. Therapeutics

A Critical Assessment Of Church Ministry In America (Part 3)
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I met our new associate pastor in the church foyer on a dreary New England morning. Outside the weather was overcast and damp, but inside the ambiance was comfortable. Despite the coziness of a warm cup of coffee and an overstuffed lounge chair, my nerves were on edge. I had never met Pastor Jack¹ before and, given the reputation that preceded him, I certainly wanted to make a good impression. As I rehearsed in my mind a series of prepared comments, my concentration wandered down the hallway. I expected Pastor Jack to enter the lobby at any moment.

Like my wife and I, Pastor Jack was a newcomer to the church. Robin and I didn't know much about the congregation or the pastoral staff other than the fact it was the closest thing in our area to an evangelical megachurch. We had been attending the church for only a few weeks before learning about Pastor Jack and his promising potential. Apparently he was an up-and-coming virtuoso; a *phenom*, more like it, whose formidable education suggested a scholar-in-the-making. Regarded as a doctrinal authority whose résumé was said to tout impressive credentials, he had been highly sought after for the vacant associate pastor position. He was, for all intents and purposes, the new go-to guy, or *hired gun*, to handle all matters theological for the executive pastor. As a would-be preacher myself who shared a similar passion for theology, I was anxious to meet him face-to-face and to interview for a potential apprenticeship. And today was the day we were scheduled to meet for the first time.

I was caught off guard when he walked into the lobby. Pastor Jack bore no resemblance to the image I had trumped up in my mind. I had envisioned him to be a man of dual personas; something like a bookish professor with thinning hair and sporting dungarees, while at the same time a ferocious *theologian* with biblical fangs capable of biting a heretic at first glance. To put it trivially, I pictured Clark Kent in the pulpit on Sunday, but a Man of Steel behind the classroom lectern on Monday.

But caricatures often prove inflated, as was the case with Pastor Jack. Into the lobby walked a rather skinny chap, a *kid* really, who looked more like a Boy Scout rather than the scholastic prodigy I had heard so much about. It didn't take long for me to deduce that the new associate pastor wasn't far removed from youth ministry in terms of his résumé. His age betrayed his reputation. When our eyes met, I couldn't help but marvel to myself: *Is this the hired gun the church brought in to be its theological watchdog? He's just a kid!*

Obscured behind a well-groomed beard (which seemed to be a deliberate attempt to mask his youth) was an unassuming man. He was nursing a cup of coffee in his hand, blowing gently on its brim, and walked casually toward me. His clothing was simple and

laid back, if not adolescent—baggy blue jeans, tennis shoes, and an un-tucked t-shirt. Notwithstanding his facial scruff, he had a rather nonchalant demeanor that suggested he had little interest in living up to appearances or stoking the hype that accompanied his name. He appeared to be, as far as I could tell, a regular blue-collar Joe. And despite my reservations, I resolved to put my prejudices aside and give him a fair shake. I certainly owed him that based on his standing among some of the godly men at the church.

“Ron?” He inquired, extending his free hand to me.

I quickly stood at attention and cleared my throat. In addition to his coffee, I noticed that in his left hand was a copy of my résumé which I had sent him earlier in the week. “Hi Jack,” I answered, returning his handshake. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Likewise,” he said. “I appreciate your emails and your interest in my work here. Do you mind if we just sit here in the foyer and talk for a while. My office is still a mess from all the unpacking.”

“Not at all,” I answered. “How are you settling in with the new position here at church?”

“Crazy,” he said. “There’s not enough time in the day to get things done.”

We continued our good natured exchange; both of us having taken a seat in our own bloated lounge chair. He spoke kindly about his wife and family, obviously proud of how they had managed the transition to the area and to the church they now called home. He inquired about my family life as well, asking how long I had been married and what I did for a living.

Finally, when we had exhausted all pleasantries, we got down to brass tacks and to the reason why I was there. “So tell me,” he began, “what exactly is it you’re looking to do here at the church?”

I swallowed nervously. As shallow as it sounds in hindsight, I wanted to earn this young man’s respect. I spoke rather mechanically. “Well, Jack, my wife and I have only been attending this church for a few weeks. We’re still getting to know the people and the ministry. And I was referred to you by one of the elders. He spoke very highly of you and seems to have great expectations for you. I was told that you bring some sharp tools to the table in terms of theology and doctrine and that I should reach out to you given my own interest in those fields.”

“That’s great,” he said.

I continued, “Since earning my degree in theology, Robin and I have been looking for a healthy, Bible-believing church to get plugged into and where I can hopefully put my spiritual gifts to work—specifically, teaching and preaching. That said; I still have lots to learn and I’m hoping to be able to work with you and hone my craft.” I paused a moment, stole a breath, and then added, “Do you think you could use a person like me?”

His response was simple, if not trite: “I could use all the help I can get.”

The conversation seemed to get off to a good start. Following protocol, I offered my testimony to him next. I discussed briefly how I came to faith in Christ as a teenager and how, later in my adult-life as a corporate professional, I started pursuing a formal education in the Bible. I verbally took Pastor Jack on a tour through my sporadic years at Bible College, addressing the highs and lows, and eventually landed on how I arrived at my current philosophy of ministry.

It was at this point that a noticeable shift in our conversation took place. As I

continued speaking passionately about my ministerial background and philosophy of ministry, Pastor Jack seemed to become less engaged. His eyes seldom—if at all—landed on me but stayed glued to my résumé. Moreover, he appeared increasingly nervous and less comfortable than when he originally sauntered into the church lobby.

This was unusual. We weren't even fifteen minutes into our interview before I started getting the eerie feeling that we were turning into some sort of blind date gone haywire. As I continued speaking, I revisited my words pensively for fear that I had said something offensive or had come off half-cocked and too self-assured. I spoke eagerly about ministry and my personal calling, but he made little inquiry into what I was saying. His attention was obviously elsewhere.

Seemingly disregarding all that I had just shared, he finally looked up from my résumé and asked me pointedly: "Tell me about the last three books you've read."

I cleared my throat. I felt like a student in class on Monday morning who had just been ambushed with an oral pop-quiz. My memory went into overdrive. "Let me see," I began. "I think the last few books I've read were *The Gospel According to Jesus* by John MacArthur; *Studies in Galatians* by M. R. De Haan, and *The Jesus I Never Knew* by Philip Yancey"

He nodded agreeably. "And who do you study?"

I hesitated. "What do you mean?"

"Well looking at your doctrinal statement attached to your résumé, it's clear to me that you are a heavy proponent of Reformed Theology, correct?"

"Yes, that's right," I answered. "I study the moderns mostly, specifically the works of John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul, and only recently John Piper and Michael Horton."

"Are you a Calvinist?" He asked.

"I am."

He smirked coyly. "A five-pointer?"

I grinned back. I took Pastor Jack to be an Arminian² by the tone inferred from his question. "Yes, I am," I said. "But I'm still a student and learning my way around the theological complexities of the TULIP bush, so to speak." After pausing briefly, I followed up: "Is my Calvinism a problem for you?"

"No, not at all," he said. "I have a few Bible-thumping friends from school who lean that way."

"Oh great," I shot back, wondering to myself if the term "Bible-thumping" was a pejorative to him.

Then our meeting took a turn for the worse. He quipped, "So you're a big theology guy, huh?" Not waiting for an answer, he stood up from his lounge chair, inviting me with his eyes to do the same, and pointed his finger at the sanctuary entrance. "You see those doors?"

I stood and nodded affirmatively.

Choosing his words cautiously, he politely said, "Candidly, Ron, the people that come through those doors every Sunday, they don't give two-bits about Calvinism or Reformed Theology. *They don't even know what it is*, nor do they care to know. In fact, they don't give two-bits about any packaged form of systematic theology that you or I try to sell them, whether it is Reformed Theology, Covenant Theology, or Dispensationalism."

I was flabbergasted. I feared where Pastor Jack might be going next with his

lecture. He continued: “You want to know what these people *really* care about?” Before I could respond, he answered his own question: “They want to know how to deal with the many daunting issues that face them in their life.”

I swallowed. “Excuse me?”

“They have *real* problems that need *real* solutions, Ron,” he said. “They have broken hearts, wounded relationships, dysfunctional families, heart wrenching divorces, wayward children, spouses who have deserted them, sexual sin and abuse, economic woes, health issues, marital unfaithfulness, poor home lives, a lack of self-worth, and a loss of identity. The whole works, Ron; something theology books conveniently ignore. They suffer from what this broken world once deceptively offered them as a glorious promise.”

My response to Pastor Jack was courteous. I nodded sympathetically, but my blushing face gave me away. “Certainly, as shepherds, we’re called to lead people empathetically through their personal trials by showing them the love of Jesus Christ,” I remarked. “That’s the calling of every man who stands in the pulpit, and there’s no denying that. But Christians aren’t guaranteed happiness in this world. Sometimes, as believers, we mistakenly feel a sense of entitlement—that God *owes us* happiness because we have taken a leap of faith to walk with Him. If that logic proved true, then God would have a lot of explaining to do to the thousands of martyrs throughout Church history whose carnal needs weren’t always met. In fact, it seems to me that, on this side of eternity, the only biblical guarantee we have as Christ-followers is that we will endure hardship, trials, and persecution—albeit with a renewed mind and a peace that transcends all understanding. I guess my point, Pastor Jack, is that the promise of Christianity is *not* emotional happiness for the carnally unhappy, but practical holiness for the spiritually unholy, no?”

I suspected that my approach to church ministry, conservative as it was on my résumé, had prompted a concerned Pastor Jack to want to clear the air right away. Yet in spite of my posturing, I was not prepared for his next remark.

“That may be true in some sense,” he said. “But that’s a fundamentalist, Bible-belt message that discourages and disheartens. We focus on the positive aspects of the gospel message. We don’t do theology here as you and I understand theology. Instead, we minister to people right where they’re at; one step at a time on their life’s journey and in the midst of their chaos. We reach out to people with the love of Jesus Christ to help improve their experience and to help them to learn how to fall in love with God. We point people to Christ, Ron, because he provides us the peace and happiness we’re all looking for. The study of theology is important to some, but it can be, at times, irrelevant and impractical to the everyday realities that plague many in a church our size.”

Theology can be irrelevant and impractical?

Pointing again to the sanctuary doors, he concluded, “The people who walk through our doors don’t really care much about theology.”

I almost lost my breath. “Are they taught to care?” I asked. “What about those of us who do? How does your ministerial philosophy accommodate the seasoned Christian? How do you address feeding the sheep?”

“Well,” he said, somewhat timidly. “That’s what we have small groups for.”

My eyebrows rose. “Small groups?”

“Yes,” he said. “Small groups.”

“In other words—‘milk from the pulpit’ but ‘meat from the small groups’, right?”
“Something like that,” he said. “I guess you could say that.”

I could hardly believe my ears. Apparently, with the exception of the occasional small group for those who felt so inclined to join, theology was nothing more than an *elective* at Pastor Jack’s church. It was not something “big church” offered as standard fare on Sunday morning.

Even more surprising, the *hired gun* of theology had altogether dismissed biblical theology as the panacea for the spiritual and emotional ills that plague believer and unbeliever alike. Instead, concealed in his remarks was the seeker-sensitive party line; namely, that pedantic and man-centered preaching—rooted in therapy and life-navigation ideology, but seasoned with just the right amount of Bible verses to qualify as spiritual—was the tonic for sick souls. A bloody cross that spoke of an atonement for man’s inward depravity and wretchedness had no business in a church whose sole ministry purpose was to bandage one’s self-esteem.

Pastor Jack’s romantic idea of church ministry failed to persuade me. In fact, it saddened me greatly. My original thought about the man raced back into my mind: *This kid is the hired gun the church brought in to be its theological watchdog?* It seemed to me that his job as watchdog had more to do with *guarding* the church *against* theology, rather than protecting and promoting it. From a ministerial vantage point, it was fast becoming apparent to me that this *hired gun* was no more than a water pistol with a commendable heart for those who hurt.

“Tell me again, Ron, about your philosophy of ministry,” he continued, “and how you see the role of a church in a person’s life.”

It was now or never, I thought to myself. Apprenticeship or no apprenticeship, I had to be forthright and give him the biblical model as I understood it. I didn’t hold back.

“Simple,” I said matter-of-factly, and fully aware that my answer would fall on disappointed ears. “My philosophy of ministry rests on the model found in Acts 2:42-47. I believe the sole purpose of the Church is to unite believers for the corporate worship of God, the in-depth proclamation and study of God’s Word, corporate and individual prayer where the chief aim is to glorify the One who answers prayer, fellowship among like-minded people, and to participate in the sacraments where the atonement and the new birth are celebrated through the Lord’s Supper and the baptismal rites.”

Pastor Jack smiled. “Wow! That sounded pretty well-rehearsed!”

We both started laughing. “I’ve got it down pat,” I said. “God knows I’ve had to say it more than once in my experience.”

Pastor Jack was respectful of my answer and his laughter lighthearted, but his cocked eyebrow told me I had overshot his therapeutic way of thinking. He pondered carefully his next words. I knew he had something pointed to ask but wasn’t necessarily sure how to frame the question. I waited with baited breath. Finally, he looked at me and dropped the bombshell: “Do you know what type of church we are?”

“I think so,” I said naively. “My understanding from the doctrinal statement and from word-of-mouth is that the church is non-denominational, independent, and evangelical.”

He smiled approvingly. But it wasn’t the answer he was looking for.

“Well, certainly we wouldn’t deny that, Ron,” he responded. “But at our basic

core, our philosophy of ministry is people-friendly. *We are a Purpose-Driven church.*”
My heart sank.

“We adopted the Purpose-Driven model back in 1997, based on Rick Warren’s program at Saddleback,” he continued. “We have consequently seen exponential growth and changed lives since incorporating this model. In fact, we doubled our size in less than one year and continue to bulge at the seams today. More and more lives are being changed by and for Jesus Christ.”

My response was flat. “Really?”

“That’s correct,” he boasted. “Our primary focus isn’t theology. It’s people. And when we decided to make the lives of hurting people our first priority, theology took a backseat. We still believe that religious study is important, obviously; don’t get me wrong. But individual people trump theology and doctrine. And as a result of our change in philosophy, we have only grown in our numbers. As I said, we doubled our size in less than one year and today we’ve quadrupled our attendance. You and I obviously haven’t been here for all of that, but even a Reformed guy like you would have to admit that our growth is hard to argue against.”

Recognizing that I didn’t appear too impressed with his statistics, Pastor Jack looked me in the eye for the first time and placed a sympathetic hand on my shoulder. Holding my attention with dramatic pause, he ended our meeting with another dose of his rhetorical witticism: “God has brought stupendous blessing to this church because of where our ministry focus lies. Again, it’s hard for anyone—even a Reformed Calvinist like you—to argue biblically against the results we’ve produced and the growth we’ve experienced. If you’re honest about it, Ron, you’d have to agree also. Don’t you think?”

Christianity-Lite: Feel-Good Religion

To get to the heart of my issue with Pastor Jack and his seeker-sensitive and Purpose-Driven philosophy requires that we first have an understanding of the terms in question. Secondly, we need to properly quantify the significance of church growth as a barometer for measuring success. And finally, we must give due attention to the sequence of ministry brought to bear in Scripture (esp. Acts. 2:42). Misinterpretations often abound and differences of opinion can arise between honest pastors who discount these essential components. My encounter with Pastor Jack is no exception.

What he regarded as “irrelevant and impractical” in terms of importance—that is, theology—the early Church in Acts 2:42-47 and the medieval Reformers deemed as first priority for effective ministry. Moreover, hidden in Pastor Jack’s rationalization of therapeutic ministry was his loose interpretation of what theology actually is. Although he didn’t say it outright, to his way of thinking—and to many Purpose-Driven pastors like him—theology is defined as nothing more than the study of divisive doctrine, the citation of dry catechisms, and the laborious pursuit of academics that turn away would-be seekers. At best, theology is given mere lip service. At worst, it’s omitted altogether.

The Purpose-Driven substratum for a successful church ministry is therapeutically based, not theologically centered, whereby success is largely measured

by the number of emotionally happy and well-adjusted occupants in the seats. But does the size of a congregation matter? Does a seeker-sensitive or Purpose-Driven church that statistically grows in attendance each year automatically win bragging rights over traditional churches that might experience less dramatic growth, if any at all?

I think not.

Simply stated, the size of a church has *never* been the biblical index for success in ministry. Faithfulness, godliness, and spiritual commitment are the virtues God esteems—and such qualities are to be the building blocks of any ministry philosophy. The size of a church does not necessarily signify God’s blessing. And popularity is no indicator of success. In fact, within Judeo-Christian history, popularity and success can be deceptive and the cause for divine condemnation (cf. Jer. 5:30–31). John MacArthur, who pastored a church that exceeds well over ten thousand attendees on any given Sunday, observes the following:

The contemporary ministry philosophy is infatuated with worldly standards of success. The churches most often judged “successful” are the large, rich megachurches with multimillion-dollar facilities, spas, handball courts, day-care centers, and so on. *But not one church in a thousand falls into that category.* That means one of two things: most churches are pitiful failures, or *the gauge of success in ministry must be something besides material prosperity* (emphasis added).³

Michael Horton, professor of theology and apologetics at Westminster Seminary California, said if growth alone is the sign of God’s endorsement, then AIDS and Islam could share a claim for God’s blessing. “If numerical growth is invariably a measure of God’s blessing,” Horton says, “then you can’t pick and choose which growing numbers are from God and which are not.”⁴

Numerical growth *alone* is an insufficient judge of effectiveness for a church’s ministry philosophy. While it can be indicative of the Holy Spirit’s blessing, it must be balanced by other important factors. As an alternative, the health of a church is best measured by the amount of godly, growing, and spiritually mature people it produces and reproduces. And one primary means by which a church churns out such results is the clear teaching of the Word of God and the theology contained therein.

Theology vs. Therapeutics

As a pastor, I uphold the study of systematic theology to be a vast and invigorating enterprise that draws the student closer to God and can often spark the supernatural increase in a church’s attendance records. For when God’s Word is faithfully preached—to include its history, theology, and application—it is impossible for it to be ineffective (cf. Isa. 55:11). Moreover, when taken to the height of its potential, and if accurately taught, theology proves to be an equal-opportunity-offender: It equally stimulates, captivates, illumines, and convicts both the seasoned believer and the skeptic alike. It is a means by which the Spirit of God quickens the curiosity of an

unbeliever and, by that same grace, enriches the faith of the most fervent believer who studies in hot pursuit of knowledge. Theology is therefore fundamental to the most important type of growth God prizes—*spiritual* growth.

Pastor Jack and I saw the meaning and impact of theology with two different lenses. So who's right?

The answer to that question lies with the true definition of theology. Pastor Jack's supposition contradicts outright the clinical classification of the term and does a *tragic* disservice to those under him. Theology is *not* the academic study of dry doctrine or dusty catechisms. Rather, as any dictionary plainly states, it is "the study of God and of God's relation to the world."⁵ To study God is to therefore *seek knowledge about God*; and to this end the Bible is not silent.

The apostles Paul and Peter make clear that churches are to fiercely pursue knowing and learning about God—that is, *to study theology*! Consequently, to marginalize this discipline in church ministry, or to discount it altogether, is to dismiss the wholesale command of apostolic instruction. As a preacher and pastor, Paul longed to see the Colossians "bearing fruit in every good work, *growing in the knowledge of God*" (Col. 1:10b, emphasis added). Likewise, to the churches situated throughout Asia Minor the apostle Peter charged, "grow in the grace and *knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*" (2 Pet. 3:18 cf. 1:5-7, emphasis added). To the elect worldwide, Peter also said, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Pet. 2:2).

Both apostles emphasized the study of theology among believers—both individually as well as corporately—as the means of attaining the aptitude necessary to safeguard biblical truth. Good theology, it can be said, produces a pure and holy knowledge of God capable of spotting heretical error a mile away. In fact, it was Paul's expectation that the church in Ephesus would preserve the study of theology as required curriculum so as to thwart error, heresy, doctrinal perversion, and ultimately apostasy. To the Ephesian elders he commanded the following:

... prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all *reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming (Eph. 4:12–14, emphasis added).

How can a Purpose-Driven church tout, as a badge of honor, the claim to know God, let alone to have the wherewithal to persuade the world to come to saving faith, when it spurns theology—the very apparatus the Church has historically used to attain a full measure of understanding about God? How can a church claim to preach about God and His redeeming work for mankind when it holds such a dim view of the discipline that defines and interprets these things? For a church's philosophy of ministry to write theology off as "irrelevant and impractical" is to compromise the apostolic mandate. It is

an egregious error that all respective churches will be held accountable for (cf. Rev. chs. 2–3).

Yet the question remains: How can two well-studied and good-intentioned pastors like Pastor Jack and I arrive at two drastically different viewpoints?

The answer, I suppose, lies with where one starts in laying the building blocks for their philosophy of ministry. Is it rooted in (1) Business-marketing that seeks to make a profit? (2) Past experience and methodology that proved successful from a worldly perspective? (3) The latest marketing techniques that seeks numerical growth? (4) Or is it rooted in the bare-bones teaching of the Bible that seeks to glorify God through learning and “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:14b)?

This is where Pastor Jack and I part ways. Whereas I maintain theology to be the very foundation that anchors the structure of church ministry, he saw theology more as an afterthought, a postscript, to a more marketable ministry of therapeutics. Supplanting the dominant role of theology in his philosophy of ministry was a misguided emphasis on the emotional needs of man. It is a new pragmatism rooted in pop-psychology that is man-centered at its core, and doles out success tips for one’s life rather than calling sinners to a life of surrender and God-centric living. And although Pastor Jack would not admit it in these terms, the essentialness of theology becomes merely optional in his way of ministry; demoted in rank and stored quietly in the church basement—out of sight and out of mind—for the bookworm to unpack in the privacy of a small group.

Illiteracy At The Expense Of Contentment

When therapy replaces theology in the Church what is the end result? The answer is embarrassingly clear from the various polls taken among American evangelicals, many of whom have been influenced by the Purpose-Driven mentality. To the point, the Church has become scholastically impaired.

The return data shows a *massive* disconnect that exists between the worldview of professing Christians and the worldview depicted in Scripture. In some circles of Christianity—albeit more liberal circles—homosexuality is seen as questionable but a moral right nonetheless. Abortion is viewed as unfortunate but permissive. The Bible is regarded as a moral compass rather than the absolute truth. And licentious conduct outside of wedlock is seen as normative. Even worse, God is often editorialized. He has become a subjective, incommunicable Life-Force of charity, mercy, and love with teeth that don’t bite and claws that won’t scratch.

But the picture is not much better in conservative circles either. Among professing evangelicals who espouse a more traditional outlook there is a preponderance of ignorance concerning the nature of God and the process of salvation. God is seen as mostly a loving God whose wrath and holy indignation flies under our radar. And good works are often seen as a résumé builder rather than the natural outgrowth of salvation. Moreover, a positive “decision for Christ” is equal to authentic conversion.

This lack of theological knowledge in today’s church is almost unprecedented in ecclesiastical history, save perhaps the dark ages. When considering the amount of

printed Bibles, Bible study tools, godly preachers, and Christian books on the market today, together with an impressive showing of multimedia and online resources that are readily accessible to us at a whim, we stand without excuse.

So how did this occur? The answer, in my view, is crystal clear: As soon as theology took a backseat to therapy and felt-needs, the evangelical Church checked its intellectualism and spiritual growth at the door.

The pews remain filled with biblically illiterate and spiritually stunted Christians who sit comfortably alongside beguiled unbelievers with no competent understanding of the judgment that awaits them. They neither know who the real Jesus is nor grasp “the obedience that comes from faith” (Rom. 1:5). Yet they attend week after week and invade the Church with the world’s values, the world’s interest, and as the world’s citizens. The Church in the United States is filled with people who have been professing Christ for decades whose only sweet tooth is for cotton-candy, feel-good religion.

Sadly, countless Christians today who fill the seats of Purpose-Driven and seeker-sensitive churches still “need someone to teach [them] the elementary truths of God’s word all over again” when, instead, they “ought to be teachers by now” (Heb. 5:12). The writer of Hebrews speaks in frank terms about the importance of learning theology and being “trained ... to distinguish good from evil” (v. 14). He writes:

Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity ... repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment (Heb. 6:2).

It can be argued from latest polling data that Purpose-Driven and seeker-sensitive preaching doesn’t even rise to the substandard level of “elementary teaching.” To the admission of some, they wade in shallow waters when attempting to swim in the Bible. Unfortunately, these churches ignore the exposition and application of Scripture at their own peril, as the warning to Israel from Hosea suggests: “my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge” (Hos. 4:6). This destruction comes upon the Church when entertainment replaces exegesis; when therapy replaces theology; and when pragmatism replaces preaching.

The Biblical Grid For Church Ministry

Purpose-Driven pastors and seeker-sensitive speakers stand accountable to the model put forth in the Bible. That the apostles placed a heavy emphasis on theology—to grow in the knowledge of God—cannot be overstated. Yet the question remains: Did the New Testament Church heed their instruction? The most cogent answer is provided by Luke in Acts 2:42–47. He reported:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the

believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (emphasis added).

Acts 2:42–47 is the grid for biblical church ministry. There you have the early Church “devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” The verb translated “devoted” in this passage connotes a steadfast and single-minded fidelity to a certain course of action—namely, the study of the Word of God.⁶ In other words, the Church was solemnly committed to learning and applying the essential elements needed in Christian discipleship that were contained in the holy writings of Christ’s apostles.

Among other things, the apostles’ doctrine expounded upon on the Person and work of Jesus Christ; his hypostatic union, eternality, incarnation, character traits, atonement, crucifixion, and resurrection. This criterion, without question, meets the very definition of theology (particularly *Christology*) something Pastor Jack and many Purpose-Driven pastors reject as “irrelevant and impractical” for the larger church setting.

Sadly, in today’s market-friendly church, the “apostles’ teaching” has been eclipsed by comic-book buffoonery that seeks to embrace, entertain, encourage, and entice one’s sense of self-worth at no cost to the “consumer.” Thrown aside (and only to be pulled out in the event of a massive calamity) is the revelation of God and the apostles’ doctrine. Pastors have become life-coaches instead of preachers and the theology of the Bible has become too boorish for public consumption.

“Not a word from their mouth can be trusted,” declared the psalmist about those who arrogantly whitewash God’s message (Psa. 5:9). We would do well to also recall the words of Paul who warned the church in Rome to be on guard against those who “*By smooth talk and flattery ... deceive the minds of naive people* (Rom. 16:17–18, emphasis added). By using the phrase “smooth talk and flattery” Paul is warning Christians to be alert against those teachers who preach to their audience only what they want to hear. Let us beware of those who attempt to make the gospel message therapeutically palatable rather than theologically relevant.

To Timothy the apostle gave the firm order that defines the call of duty for every pastor in the pulpit: “Preach the Word ... in season and out of season” (2 Tim. 4:2). Why did Paul give this charge to his protégé? Because the great apostle knew all too well that it is through the intensive theological preaching of sacred Scripture—not therapeutic musings or self-help ideology disguised as preaching—that God reveals Himself to His creation. Just as “he revealed himself to Samuel *through his word*” (1 Sam. 3:21, emphasis added), so God reveals Himself to us today through the preaching, teaching, and studying of His Word. He is a God who has never changed the reward for those who pursue Him theologically (cf. Mal. 3:6).

It should not surprise us that the current state of church ministry is bleak. God designed the Church to be a royal sanctuary where His Word *about Himself* is proclaimed and explained. We are to emulate the era of Nehemiah and Ezra’s day where the people of God came together in a holy house of worship equipped with godly

shepherds who taught the theology of the Bible. Ezra unleashed God’s Word, “making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read” (Neh. ch. 8).

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God commanded His ministers: “let him who has my word speak my word faithfully” (Jer. 23:28, NASB). To supplant this mandate with motivational life-lessons that address the carnal felt-needs of self-absorbed and materialistic sinners is a travesty to which the Church will not soon recover. Our only hope, dare I say, is for God to graciously raise up from within our own ranks another Martin Luther—whomever he might be—to spearhead the charge and to call the Church back to *sola scriptura*!⁷

Let those of us who are called to shepherd the flock take note.

—Ronald H. Gann

¹ I have opted to use “Pastor Jack” as a pseudonym to respect his identity.

² By definition, an Arminian is one who rejects the Calvinistic understanding of election and predestination upholding, instead, that man has the free-will to respond in faith to the Gospel by his own volition. Arminianism was established and based upon the teachings of Jacob Arminius (1232-12312).

³ John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Chicago, IL Crossway Books, 1993), 28-29.

⁴ *Numbers racket*; Copyright © 2009 WORLD Magazine; December 01, 2007, Vol. 22, No. 44.

⁵ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary copyright © 2008 by Merriam-Webster, Incorporated.

⁶ Richard L. Longnecker. *Acts of the Apostles; The NIV Bible Commentary, vol. 2: The New Testament*, Barker, Kenneth L. and Kohlenberger III, John R. eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 397.

⁷ *Sola scriptura* (Latin ablative, “by scripture alone”) is the assertion that the Bible as God’s written word is self-authenticating, clear (perspicuous) to the rational reader, its own interpreter (“Scripture interprets Scripture”), and sufficient of itself to be the final authority of Christian doctrine.