

## **Book Review of 'The Deliberate Church' by Mark Dever and Paul Alexander**

### **The Deliberate Church - Foreword and Introduction**

The author introduces the book by clarifying first what this book "The Deliberate Church" is not about regarding church growth.

- i) it's not about new, unique or innovative approach,
- ii) it's not a program dependent on technique or set plan
- iii) it's not a quick fix but it is the Word of God that builds the church. The Gospel governs the way the church functions because it is the power of God unto Salvation, that gives people new birth and fights the church's enemies. We just have to trust that Jesus will build His church by the agency of His Spirit and the power of His Gospel for the manifestation of His wisdom and glory.

The distinguishing marks of a church are the right and clear preaching of this gospel and the right administration of biblical ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper).

### **Chapter 1: The four P's**

The author lists four P's that he is armed with to drive church growth - preaching, praying, personal discipling and patience.

**Preaching** God's word is the instrument to create, convict, and conform His people. God gives life, spiritual health and holiness to His people through His Word. There is no other way other than the Gospel that can give life to dead sinners and dead churches.

**Praying** shows our dependence on God and God as the source of our blessings. We should pray for the health and holiness of the church, faithful preaching of the Gospel, spiritual growth and maturity of the congregation, sinners to be converted and opportunities for evangelism.

**Personal discipling** involves regular fellowship and genuine care and concern for the members and building up their lives through spiritual encouragement, correction, accountability and prayer.

**Patience** involves thinking in terms of eternity the work of God, ministering to the members by encouragement, patient in teaching, gentle in correction, persevering and faithful.

### **Chapter 2: Beginning the Work**

The foundation of the church is the Gospel and the life, the death and resurrection and coming of Jesus Christ preached. Clarify what is the true Gospel, what is the required (i.e. confession and repentance) and what it means to be a Christian (i.e. to deny self and follow Christ). The author cautioned the preacher to win souls with the gospel, not technique, entertainment, charisma and not self-serving. Cultivate trust with expositional preaching, personal relationship and humility.

### **Chapter 3: Doing Responsible Evangelism**

The author lists four essentials of evangelism - God (creator and judge), man (born in sin, separated from God), Christ (fully God and fully man who atoned for man's sin) and response (repent and believe in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins and be reconciled to God).

Prayer is not a ground of assurance of salvation. Rather the fruit of our lives such as holiness of conduct, love for others, and soundness of doctrine, these are the things that accompany salvation.

Evangelism should avoid entertainment and music as one is likely to be won to the entertainment and through feelings than the message. The gospel is confrontational, not entertaining.

## **Chapter 4: Taking in New Members**

This chapter is about ensuring as far as possible, that every person accepted into membership is truly converted because membership is a demarcation to distinguish the world and His chosen people. The book mentions a mandatory new members' class teaching the statement of faith, the church covenant and membership responsibilities. It establishes corporate beliefs, commitment, identity and unity working together the spread of the Gospel. This also includes a membership interview to ascertain a person's understanding of the gospel, the sacraments, reason for leaving previous church and a personal testimony.

## **Chapter 5: Doing Church Discipline**

A healthy church requires formative and corrective discipline. Formative discipline is exercising and doing the right things such as preaching, teaching, bible studies, fellowship meetings, corporate worship. Corrective discipline is correcting something that has gone wrong such as errors in doctrine and lifestyle which require rebuke, admonition, and excommunication. Christians are to build accountability relationships by welcoming others into their lives for confessing sins and receiving biblical correction with prayer, encouragement and application of Word. If public corrective discipline is necessary, it is wise to have a plurality of elders doing it with the pastor rather than an unilateral action.

## **Chapter 6: Understanding the Regulative Principle**

The regulative principle states that everything we do in a corporate worship gathering must be clearly warranted by Scripture. The regulative principle forbids anything not commanded by scripture whereas the normative principle allows anything not forbidden by scripture.

In the Old Testament, God forbade idol worship, Exodus 20:4. In the New Testament, God gave proper worship instructions such as worship Him in spirit and truth John 4:19-24, prophecy (preaching) over speaking in tongues 1 Corinthians 14. Examples like these follow the regulative principle.

## **Chapter 7: Applying the Regulative Principle**

God regulates church worship by the same Word, informing us how we are to approach Him. The five basic elements of corporate worship revealed in His words are: read the Word, preach the Word, pray the Word, sing the Word and see the Word (in the ordinances). These are essential to the corporate life, health and holiness of the local church.

**Reading the Word** (1 Timothy 4:13) acknowledges that the life and growth of the church depends on the power of God's Word, acknowledges our weakness and willingness to submit to the verdict and commands of God.

**Preaching the Word** (2 Timothy 4:2) is God's ordained method for communicating the Gospel to sinners.

**Praying the Word** (1 Timothy 2:1) communicates that we want to approach Him on His terms according to what He has revealed Himself to be.

**Singing the Word** (Ephesians 5:19) builds the congregation with praise to God through hymns and spiritual songs. The best hymn sung directs our focus away from ourselves to the character and gospel of God.

**Seeing the Word** (in the ordinances, Luke 22:19) is where we see the Gospel enacted to assure us of the trustworthiness of His Gospel and the reality of our participation in the New Covenant.

## **Chapter 8: The Role of the Pastor**

The pastor's primary responsibilities are to preach (and teach) the Gospel and administer the ordinances. However, teaching is everything that happens in a corporate worship - the hymns, prayers, the preaching all the way to the benediction. He has to see that the main theological theme of the message being preached be present in the hymns, prayer, scripture reading and this means the pastor has to plan services months in advance.

Other day-to-day duties include teaching, staff meetings, elders meeting, visitation, discipleship, prayer meetings, writing articles, overseeing other ministries.

The pastoral ministry is summed up with three general obligations - graze (feed the sheep on the Word of God), guide (equipping people for growth and cultivate servant leadership) and guard (watch against false teachings, refute those who oppose it).

### **Chapter 9: The Roles of the Different Gatherings**

Different gatherings are necessary as each performs a different role in the cultivating of corporate health according to the needs of each gathering and ministry. The author lists gatherings in his church such as Adult Education Hour (main equipping time), Sunday Morning Service (feeding time with biblical exposition), Sunday Evening Service (family time), Wednesday Evening Service (study time) and Members' Meetings (administrative time). For example, the Sunday Morning Service is for the purpose of edification (1 Corinthians 14), therefore it is proper to calibrate the service not targeted at unbelievers but with scriptural parameters for mutual edification of believers.

### **Chapter 10: The Role of the Ordinances**

The ordinances do not equate with salvation. Baptism is for believers only and is a physical representation of the spiritual circumcision of our hearts, identifying us as members of the New Covenant. It identifies us as people called of God. The Lord's Supper is a symbolic remembrance of Christ's atoning death on our behalf. It is a proclamation of Christ death, resurrection and return and for self-examination. We also take the Lord Supper as a symbol of unity and fellowship of the church.

### **Chapter 11: Loving Each Other**

Showing Christian love for one another is a critical evangelistic tool for the spread of the Gospel and growth of the church. The author uses the analogy that the church has to be full of live, active cultures that are mutually encouraging and growing spiritually. He lists five aspects of this live active culture:

- i) Covenantal - believers who have become part of the New Covenant in Christ and covenanted to help each other in encouragement and correction in the Christian walk,
- ii) Carefulness with concern in obeying God in every aspect of our corporate life together,
- iii) Corporate - to place a high priority on the corporate life of the congregation through mutually edifying relationship to love and good deeds.
- iv) Cross-cultural - the church is for everyone
- v) Cross-generational - church where children and adults relate to one another for mutual encouragement and edification.

### **Chapter 12: Music**

Singing the gospel together highlights the corporate nature of the church reminding us that we are not alone and that encourages us to press on together. Singing highlights the participative nature of worship, that we are not spectators in church. The author cautioned against consistently having soloists or even choirs as it can have unintended effect of undermining corporate participative nature and may blur the line between worship and entertainment, and focus our attention on the performers than on God. He gives three guidelines for congregational singing –

- i) it is public, not privatised, i.e. not closing of eyes in pursuit of privatised emotional experience with God,
- ii) it should be theologically rich, i.e. to praise Him, His character, the sufficiency of Christ's work and present Him in all His glory and grace.
- iii) it should be spiritually encouraging i.e. reminding us of our hope in God and the truth of His Gospel.

In terms of musical accompaniment, there should be sparse musical accompaniment to enhance congregational singing.

### **Chapter 13: The Importance of Elders**

The pattern of church structure and governance is based on a plurality of elders, who devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer. Acts 20:17-38. They are spiritual leaders of the flock. The practical benefits of plurality of elders are:

- i) it balances pastoral weakness,
- ii) it diffuses congregational criticism,
- iii) it adds pastoral wisdom,
- iv) it indigenizes leadership,
- v) it enables corrective discipline
- vi) it defuses "us vs him".

### **Chapter 14: Looking for a Few Good Man**

It is wise to recognize men who are already qualified and ready to do the work of an elder than to train one. 1 Timothy 5:24-25. Those men already having elder qualities are more likely to be fruitful and faithfully as an office elder.

The author starts by stating what an elder is not - not simply an older man, not simply a successful businessman, not simply involved community member, not simply a good ol'boy, not a politician and is not a female 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

The office of an elder is designed for leadership of the church 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. An elder is simply a man of exemplary, Christ-like character who is able to lead God's people in the way that profits them spiritually.

### **Chapter 15: Assessment**

There are three aspects in the assessment, namely - Character, Ability and Fit

**Character** - is what makes an elder and is it shown in his behaviour, 1 Timothy 5:24-25. In short, is this man setting an example for other church members in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity.

**Ability** - Potential elders must be tested in their ability to minister the Word and help people grow in knowledge, love and fruitfulness.

**Fit** - can he fit well with the existing elders in terms of his gifts and communication style.

### **Chapter 16: Why Character is Crucial**

Character is crucial because modelling godliness is central to his work. As the elder models holiness in lifestyle, gentleness in speech, selfless in relationship, soundness in doctrine, and a loving concern for other members, the church will be encouraged to think of godliness in like manner, and the pastor's preaching will be illustrated in these live examples of godliness. In meetings, having a gentle, self-controlled spirit is critical.

The most compelling reason for character is that elders must give an account to God for the way they shepherd the flock for God holds them accountable and elders incur a stricter judgement.

### **Chapter 17: Getting Started**

Pastoral leadership needs to be earned through faithful, accurate, clear, biblical preaching before the members are convinced and willing to submit to the elder leadership model.

The members must be taught the biblical qualifications of elders, so that they can recognise who fits the bill. The pastor/elders have the responsibility to recognise and nominate potential leaders, followed by election done at the congregational level. Upon being elected, the elder is installed.

### **Chapter 18: Staffing**

On staffing, the author is not in favour of specialization or having separate ministry departments. Every member should be willing to serve where he is most needed, not just where he is most gifted. Specialization may lead to a truncated growth due to narrowness of ministry, fragmentation and territoriality that may erode the unity of the church. It may be best to present a vision of pastoral ministry as a corporate unity, with an integrated whole while recognizing different aspect of the whole. For this, we will need staff who are versatile, who can perform a wide range of duties. There is to be a healthy distinction in relationship between staff, elders and deacons, where the elder sets the vision of the church and the staff implementing the vision. Deacons serve in physical and financial matters and bring unity under the authority of the elders.

### **Chapter 19: The Word and Prayer**

A typical meeting should consist of the Word and prayer. Reading of God's word orientates the meeting under the authority of the sovereign God and principles of godliness. The study of the Bible builds and develops members in maturity and spiritual discernment. In a prayer meeting, the elders and members share their prayer items, pray for one another and other members church ministries.

### **Chapter 20: The Agenda – What to Talk About**

Before a meeting, the agenda is sent to everyone so that all come prepared for the meeting. In the book, reading and praying take up to two hours. This is applicable for prayer meeting but not for session meeting in the case for Maranatha BPC. The agenda includes membership, member care, administration regarding finances, facilities, church events, church ministry and missions. The conduct of meeting requires each one to exercise humility, gentleness, reasonableness to preserve the unity of the members in the meeting.

### **Chapter 21: Decision Making – How to Talk About It**

Few things to consider when leading or participating in meetings:

- i) humility,
- ii) give biblical reasons for the things suggested where possible,
- iii) exercise patience
- iv) be willing to yield, if pressing on will fracture the church
- v) give and receive godly encouragement and criticism and
- vi) have a sense of humour.

### **Conclusion**

Besides holiness, faith, love and sound doctrine, the healthy church is:

A Godward-looking Church with a commitment to set forth the truth in Christ who is what transforms, builds up and set us free.

An outward-looking church, looking to be a blessing to other individual, churches and other countries.

By Ng Thiam Koon