

**Core Seminar**

**Living as a Church**

**Class 4: Preaching and Prayer**

*The Foundation for Unity*

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#### I. Introduction

#### The life of our church should be *evidently* supernatural. That is, when people look in on our church, they should see in the depth and breadth of our relationships something that is beyond what they can explain simply through natural means.

#### God has revealed his normal means for doing the supernatural. In particular, this morning we want to look at God’s supernatural means of building his church through prayer and preaching.

#### Preaching is one normal means of supernatural grace. Think of Romans 10:17, *“Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”* Supernatural love comes from supernatural faith, right? Preaching is an ordinary means by which God gives his supernatural gift of faith to his people.

#### Then, as I mentioned, the other means of grace we want to look at is prayer. Jesus told us in John 14 that, *“13I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.”* So another way that we see God do supernatural work in our churches is to approach him in prayer knowing that in Christ, God will hear our praise, our confession, our thanksgiving and our requests.

#### For the rest of our time together this morning, I want to look at each of these in turn. How can we be part of community in this church with supernatural unity? Primarily as we hear God’s word and as we pray. We’ll start with God’s word.

#### II. Preaching

#### *Preaching Matters*

#### The fact that preaching is God’s mean to accomplish the supernatural shouldn’t come as a surprise to us. After all, God has *always* created his people by his word. In the beginning God created all things by the power of his word. He created the people of Israel by the word of his law on Mount Sinai. God brings life by his word, for example; Ezekiel’s vision of a valley of dry bones. We read there:

#### *“So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. . . . I prophesized as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.”* (37:7, 10). Imagine—a man speaking dead bodies to life.

#### God’s word, spoken by Ezekiel, is what brings his people to life. Which is exactly what we see in the New Testament. Jesus—God’s word made flesh—taught God’s people. And its Peter’s preaching of the gospel in Acts 2 that first ignites the church, and the apostles’ faithful teaching that sustains it.

#### God’s word is central to the identity of his people. Christianity is not primarily about spiritual experience or about warm community or about acts of service – though it certainly involves these things. But it is first and foremost a message that can be supported based on historical fact: *“that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.”* (I Cor 15:4-5). This is the good news; the Gospel. And preaching that message is the source of our life as a church and eternal life for each of us.

#### *B. Especially Expositional Preaching*

#### You can have preaching and see nothing supernatural as a result. Not all preaching is faithful. And not all people are faithful listeners. Just think of all those people who listened to Jesus himself and then went away, unchanged. So first I want to talk about what kind of preaching should be seen as normal —and then what happens what that preaching intersects with the community of God’s people.

#### What kind of preaching will supernaturally create God’s people out of nothing? In a word, preaching that is expositional. That “exposes” a passage of Scripture to us. When we say that a sermon is “expositional,” or “expository,” we mean that it’s designed to explain a particular passage of scripture, so that the main point of the sermon is the main point of the passage.

#### The alternative is what people call “topical” preaching—where the preacher determines the primary point he wants to communicate in the sermon and may or may not use a main passage of scripture to support that point.

#### Topical preaching is in no way bad—we have topical sermons at this church, Mark is preaching a topical sermon this morning! But a preaching schedule that is predominantly expositional will grow a congregation better and with more lasting results. Why is that? Because as a preacher preaches expositionally, moving through successive passages of scripture week after week, the congregation better understands Scripture in its overall context.

#### Let me elaborate on this by giving three specific advantages of expositional preaching:

#### When a pastor preaches through a series of passages, basing each sermon on the main point of a passage of Scripture (rather than on a topic), God’s Word sets the agenda for the sermon. Very practically, expositional preaching forces a preacher to address verses that he may be uncomfortable with or don’t fit as cleanly into his theology.

#### Expositional preaching is a better way of teaching the bible. When a pastor preaches a passage of Scripture in context, taking the point of the passage as the point of the message—he and the congregation often hear from God things they did not know when the pastor began to study the passage.

#### And third, expositional preaching teaches a congregation how to read and study the bible for themselves. When the sermon week after week teaches the congregation to be faithful explainers and appliers of God’s word, the Bible will seep into every aspect of life together.

#### *C. Preaching = God’s Word + God’s People*

#### But if we just stop there, we still haven’t traced out all that preaching does in a church. Because preaching isn’t just exposition of God’s word; it is God’s word forGod’s people. So what happens when God’s word intersects with God’s people? Three things to consider.

#### Application

#### Most obviously, we apply God’s word. Consider the weight of responsibility that rests on our shoulders—we who are privileged to hear gospel-centered preaching each and every week. I pray that on the Last Day we in this church will see the fruit of such preaching in our lives.

#### There are some things we can do to better apply the sermons. We can read through the passage in our quiet times during the week. We can pray for the preacher and for our application. We can take notes.

#### But even beyond those things, we should think about sermon application as a corporate endeavor instead of an individual one.

#### So a good question to consider: are you working in a faithful, humble way to help apply the truth you receive to the lives of your brothers and sisters in Christ? Do they know your life well enough—and do you know theirs—that you can help them apply a sermon in ways they may not have thought of? A few ideas of how you might do this: (1) talk after service/over lunch about the sermon; (2) flesh out application points in small group; (3) in discipling relationships; (4) in family devotionals. (5) rather than trying to remember pages of notes from each sermon, pick one or two things each week that you will prayerfully apply to your life—and talk with others about them. God gives us a feast each week. Let’s put it to work.

#### Contextualization

#### But that’s not the only thing that happens when preaching happens in the context of community. The Word is applied to the particular needs of our congregation; to our shortcomings; to the way that God has been moving among us; with our particular demographics in mind.

#### Authority

#### Preaching in a church should explain, and interpret, and apply Scripture. So in one sense its authority rests on Scripture. But we know that as sinful humans, we can err in explaining, and interpreting, and applying inerrant Scripture. Preaching goes beyond that. You see, preaching in a church is backed by the united testimony of an entire community of Christians—each with their own sins, but each indwelt by God’s life-giving Spirit. When the church works as it should, then the words preached on Sunday morning are tacitly confirmed by the elders—and ultimately by the congregation at large. If a preacher began preaching what the congregation understands to be contrary to Scripture, then the members have a duty to act.

#### Mark has said it many times “If I start preaching any other Gospel, fire me”

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#### The congregation is the final authority on such doctrinal matters, we see that clearly in Galatians 1 as Paul charges the church at large to demand true preaching, and put negatively in 2 Timothy 4:3 as Paul warns Timothy that some may begin to demand false teaching —and thus we can have extra confidence in the truth of what we hear preached in a healthy church because it is backed by the testimony of a community of Christians. The more you know the community of a church, the more you can trust its preaching. And good preaching will fuel good community.

#### So we can be part of the supernatural community of the local church through preaching—as we listen to good preaching, apply that preaching to ourselves and others, and support good preaching. But it also happens through prayer, which is where we’ll turn for the rest of our time together.

#### III. Prayer

#### I want us to use the rest of our time to think somewhat narrowly about praying as it pertains to the local church.

#### I think we all understand that prayer is important. But when we think about prayer, the first thing that comes to mind—at least for me—is private prayer. But the Bible also very clearly calls on Christians to pray *together*. Think of the Lord’s Prayer that Jesus gave us in Matthew 6: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

#### When Jesus gave us a model for prayer, he put it in a form that commends it even more for our use together as a body than for private use. One of the primary ways we pray as a church is when we gather as a church. So let’s start with why congregational prayer is so important.

#### *A. Why is Corporate Prayer Important?*

#### God uses our prayer together to advance his kingdom

#### We pray together because, quite simply, we need to. We pray out of need—because we need God to act. Just like we see in the book of Acts. There, the early church had a number of obstacles to overcome, including persecution; yet it continued to expand. Several times we see that when the early church faced persecution, it gathered together to pray. So, in Acts 4, we read that Peter and John were released from jail and the church gathered to hear their report. You would think that with their leaders in prison, people would just pray on their own rather than risking coming together. But corporate prayer was important enough that the believers gathered together to pray together, praising God for his sovereignty and asking for boldness in the face of the threats. Then Luke tells us:

#### *“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.”* (Acts 4:31).

#### And this is not limited to the particular circumstances of the early church. Throughout history we’ve seen God’s work to be especially active when His people have joined together to pray.

#### God is glorified through the unity of our prayer.

#### As we’ve heard in past classes, unity among God’s people glorifies God. That’s why in Ephesians, chapter 4, Paul calls on the entire church to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Praying together is one way that we satisfy this command by visibly uniting together as God’s people to pray.

#### The unity we demonstrate when we seek God together in prayer is particularly striking.

#### Two things to note in particular: (a) prayer together is a means of God’s grace in which we grow spiritually as we hear others commit to prayer; and (b) corporate prayer also can serve as a powerful witness to non-Christians who see the love and commitment that Christians have for one another in their prayers.

#### Corporate prayer unites us

#### Not only does corporate prayer *benefit* from our unity; it actually helps to *create* unity. When we pray together, we are, in some ways, leaving behind our own selfish desires and focusing on God and others. So, for example, on Sunday evenings, we pray for each other in various ways: we thank God for His grace in people’s lives; we pray for others’ physical health; for their spiritual well-being; we pray for their ministries, etc. Both praying for others, and hearing others pray for us, naturally draws us closer together as we learn more about each other and, as we feel the effect of those prayers in the work done by the Holy Spirit. You’ll hear people describe the evening service as our family time. And a primary reason for this description is that we have that time of united prayer together.

#### One idea for how we can support that unity: consider if there are prayer requests or testimonies of God’s grace you could share with the congregation that could draw us together and help us as a body to marvel at the power and mercy of our God. Think of corporate prayer for you as a service to this congregation. For some of us, that might feel a bit strange. We’re fairly private people who think of others praying for us as a burden on them. But that’s not at all how the Bible views things. There’s a great passage in 2 Corinthians 1 where Paul is sharing about a particularly difficult situation.

#### *“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.”* (2 Cor. 1:8-11).

#### That last verse is right on point: *“Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.”* Was it a burden on these believers to pray for Paul? Absolutely not. It was a blessing to lift him up and share in the joy of God’s continual deliverance of him. What if Paul had decided that his problems weren’t worth bothering the church? We should thank God that he did not.

#### So think about how you can share your needs with others so we may be drawn together as believers and encouraged by God’s amazing work. Are you struggling in your faith? Are you struggling at work? Are you struggling in your marriage? Are you struggling with evangelism? I remember when a brother in this church shared on Sunday night that he was struggling with his belief in God. His openness was a good example for us, and as the church rallied around him in prayer, we were all able to praise God as our prayers were answered. Allow others to bring you before our Lord in prayer—it is a privilege for them.

#### Corporate prayer teaches us how to pray

#### I wonder if you’ve ever noticed that our morning services follow the same outline that many Christians use in their own quiet times. They follow the path of the gospel: we look at God’s holiness, our sin, Christ’s work on the cross, and our response. And our corporate prayer together follows the ACTS model—adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication—though not always in that order. Why is that? Because we pray together in part to teach ourselves how to pray. Let me explain what I mean.

#### It’s a good discipline to just focus on praising him. So our prayers of praise teach us what it means to just focus our gaze on the beauty of God and delight in him. Similarly, confession is uncomfortable, and we quickly shift to asking God to change us. But when we do that, we lose the opportunity to explore our hearts and acknowledge what’s really there. Having an extended time to just confess sin makes the assurance of pardon that we read from the Bible—and the responding song that we sing—that much more joyful. And we can learn from the prayers of petition and thanks as well. In the prayer of petition, for example, Mark will pray for much more than just our own needs, which is where we’re tempted to focus. He prays for our government, for the persecuted church, for missions, for evangelism, for our church—and finishes by praying through the points of his sermon. If you follow carefully as we’re led in prayer, I hope that it begins to improve your own prayer life.

#### *B. Praying for our church*

#### Well, before we end our time together, let me give you a few thoughts for how you can pray daily for our church. My hope is that as these things become part of our daily routine, we will see wonderful things happen in our church.

#### Pray for the preacher.

#### Think of Paul writing to the Ephesians: “Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.” (Eph 6:19-20). If the great apostle Paul needed prayer to speak, certainly our preachers do.

#### Pray through the directory.

#### I know you’ve heard this said before. And I know it involves praying for a lot of people you don’t know. But the good news is that by praying through their pictures, you’ll get to know them faster. And just like Paul prayed for the Roman Christians he’d never met, praying daily for people you don’t have a particular connection to—just because they’re members of your church—is wonderfully honoring to God.

#### Pray for our church as a whole.

#### Our church culture is the habits, expectations, and behaviors that come to characterize us as a church. You may have noticed that Mark has us pray through a number of different things on Sunday night—like praying that we would have real unity in our diversity. That we would make our relationships transparent to each other, that we would see hospitality as an important part of following Christ. These are all based on a list I put together years ago trying to capture the distinctives of the culture god has built in this place. You’ll find the whole list on the inside cover of the church directory—and I’ve reproduced it on the back of your handout. It’s a great thing to pray through on your own in addition to the two or three that we pray through every Sunday night.

#### IV. Conclusion

#### So…how do we expect the supernatural to be at work in our church? We celebrate the regular preaching of God’s word, and we pray. Those are the ways that God naturally does what is supernatural. His normal means of grace.

#### Let’s close in prayer.