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PREACHING THROUGH HOSTILITY

You may have heard about my (Brian) church story. The first five years were brutal. I went to pastor a Southern Baptist Church of thirty elderly people on the southside of Louisville, Kentucky. The church was in financial shambles and about two to three years from closing. The church hired me at a salary I later found out they could not pay for longer than six months. There were three different efforts to get me fired in the first five years. The first attempt happened three short months into my ministry there by a staff member I inherited who boasted of getting my predecessor fired and tried to do the same with me.

The second firing attempt was at the two-and-a-half-year mark over trying to find the 580 members on the rolls who had not been to church in over ten years. They tried to remove me while I was on vacation. The third firing attempt was at the five-year mark – which ultimately led to an exodus of 25 per cent of my congregation, some of whom had come in the previous five years and had become dear

friends. When the smoke cleared, I was beat up, discouraged and ready to leave. When asked why I stayed, I looked back and saw two reasons: First, I sensed God would not take us through all that and then abandon us. There were evidences of God's grace and work in the midst of the hostility. Second, I was haunted by the words of Hebrews 13:17: 'Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.' I realized I will give an account for every soul under my care, even those who don't like me very much. So, I stayed. And some of the hostile members stayed also. It was in year six where God in His power and grace turned the ship that led our church to change course and flourish.

The church grew numerically and, more importantly, spiritually. We affirmed a plurality of pastors and deacons where those who served in these biblical offices knew their Scriptural role and excelled in it. We saw conversions from the neighborhood. We saw our multi-generational-but-all-white congregation begin to grow in ethnic diversity. Refugees from the community began to come to the church. We raised up pastors and missionaries and sent them out. And most significantly, the angry, scowling faces I saw when I looked out while preaching every Sunday changed. Those who were once hostile to me began to trust me. They grew to love me and I them. And they grew to accept my preaching and even grew to love the preached Word more. I'm so glad I stayed and even more I am glad many of those who were hostile to me stayed. For it laid the ground work for a sovereign and powerful God to do this stunning

redemptive work in the lives of a young, broken pastor and discouraged, hurting people.

Preaching through Hostility

The hostility I faced in the first five years was felt every week when I preached. It is not an exaggeration to say that for years I preached to angry, scowling faces. One reason for this was the enormous distrust the church had for the pastoral office as a result of a thirty-five-year pattern of two to three-year pastorates. Another reason, however, was the way I chose to preach was different than what they had previously experienced. I came to a seventy-five-year-old church who had never heard an expository sermon. Their steady diet of preaching for over half a century was very typical for a Southern Baptist Church – evangelistic topical preaching with a strong influence from the Billy Graham Crusades.

When I came to the church, I began preaching expository sermons through books of the Bible. It was not received well. People thought what I was doing was more of a Bible Study, and not preaching. I believed this was the best way to embrace God's design to breathe life into a church – through His Word being preached verse by verse. As I frustrated some members, God began to bring others desiring to hear God's Word through expository sermons. As a result, the first five years was a slow steady combination of winning current members with this form of preaching, drawing in others from outside the church who wanted this kind of preaching, and at the same time frustrating a few others who eventually left because of it.

By year five, 85 per cent of the pastoral committee who hired me had either died or left frustrated with my preaching in particular. The key member of the committee who got me an interview initially left after three years. Upon her exit, she wrote me a letter. She explained that she left because of the way I preached. I had chosen to preach from a manuscript because I wanted to be careful in those early years about what I said and didn't say. I committed myself to preach with a manuscript well. I'll be the first to acknowledge I needed to grow to engage the congregation better as I sought to preach from manuscripts. Those early years were frustrating for me in part because I was a young preacher trying to figure out who I was as a preacher – which every young pastor needs to figure out. I was convinced that God's Word linked with the Spirit of God was enough to build a healthy church – even through a young inexperienced preacher. So, through all the adversity and hostility, I kept preaching.

But it was hard. Really hard. However, in God's kind providence I realized it was through this hostility where I learned the biblical formula to sustain a preaching ministry in a hostile environment and even bear fruit in it. The formula is simple and yet profound – preach and stay.

Preach and Stay

The biblical formula to survive and bear fruit in the hostility of church revitalization is to *preach and stay*. Before we consider this formula, we need to be aware of two other common preaching strategies that exist in many

church revitalization contexts that are harmful and do not bring lasting spiritual life to a dying church.

The first harmful preaching strategy is *preach and leave*. I watch many pastors, who share the convictions outlined in this book, go into a struggling church and preach faithfully. They preach the Bible with all their heart. They give themselves to study and prayer. They are committed to expository preaching. But they quickly grow impatient. They assume that an implication of God's Word being powerful is that it will bring change quickly. Out of frustration and unmet expectations they leave for the next church they feel will be different.

The other harmful preaching strategy is *don't preach, but stay*. This represents the other side that is committed to stay and be patient but does not feel the Word of God through expository preaching is the answer to bring life to a struggling church. In this scenario pastors either preach topical, lighthearted sermons, not wanting to offend, or, even worse feel no confidence in the role preaching plays to bring life back to a dying church. Instead, gimmicks, pragmatism, and entertainment become the trusted quick-fix strategy. The end goal is to try and make everyone happy.

Unfortunately, both these methods of preaching in revitalization do not bear fruit and are even harmful to the flock. The biblical formula to preach through hostility is to preach and stay.

Preach

As already mentioned in Chapter 5, one of the clearest commands in the New Testament is Paul's exhortation to