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From Professor to Pastor

Video Intro from Gene



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In society generally, we were living through some rather turbulent years in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Challenged by questions and comments from my students, I abruptly shifted gears midsemester to once again see how the apostles and subsequently all believers carried out the Great Commission. Ultimately, this led me to author the first edition of this book.

As a result of this dynamic classroom experience, and writing *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*, I became a church planting pastor after nearly twenty years in the academic world. Frankly, it's been a great adventure with numerous hills, curves, bumps in the road—and some fairly deep valleys—but always ultimately upward. It's been a tremendous learning experience. It's my prayer that you'll be challenged by some of these insights and personal lessons reflected in this new edition.

A Decision That Changed My Ministry Life

Several families in Dallas kept abreast of the stimulating discussions we were having on the seminary campus. They asked me to meet with them

in a home meeting to share the results of several years of biblical research and interaction.

I had just completed the original manuscript for *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*, so I shared the essence of this forthcoming book with this small group. Excited by what they heard, these eight couples asked me if I would help them start a new church and become their founding pastor.

They were particularly intrigued with the thesis of this book—that the Holy Spirit has inspired the authors of Scripture to give us absolute functions and supracultural principles to enable us to plant and produce mature churches at any moment in history and in any given culture of the world. These biblical writers, again under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, have given us freedom to apply these principles by developing cultural forms and structures that will enable us to carry out the Great Commission—also at any moment in history and in any culture in the world. In essence, functions and principles (correctly stated) are enduring and never changing, but forms are non-absolutes. Structures are simply a cultural means for applying biblical absolutes.¹

A Very Encouraging Response

As the evening progressed, I couldn't ignore the enthusiasm these concepts generated. Neither could I ignore the invitation to help them start a new church. To add to the encouraging and positive response from these couples, some of my most enthusiastic students at the seminary were encouraging me to do the same thing—particularly to put into practice what we were discovering from Scripture. I was challenged, along with my wife, Elaine. After praying specifically about this opportunity, we helped start the first Fellowship Bible Church and I served as the lead pastor.

From the beginning, all of us agreed not to do things differently just to be different. But neither were we going to do things the same way because they had been done that way before. Rather, we decided to focus on what we believed were normative, supracultural, and enduring principles. We would then allow the forms and structures to emerge that would help us apply these principles in our particular cultural context.

Little did we anticipate the explosion of interest among both believers and nonbelievers. Within a year, I knew I could not continue to be a

full-time professor and a full-time pastor. Frankly, I was overwhelmed. Initially all of us as elders attempted to find someone who would replace me as lead pastor—so I could once again devote all my efforts ministering to students at the seminary. Frankly this was my personal desire. But at the last minute, a viable pastoral prospect decided not to accept our invitation.

I was initially disappointed. But a short time later both my wife and I sensed we needed to accept the elders' invitation for me to become their first full-time lead pastor. I soon discovered that in spite of our unusual church planting success, there was much more for me—and my fellow elders—to learn in this relatively new approach to church life. Little did I realize how much that was true—which is reflected in this “rewrite.”

God continued to bless our efforts, and by the end of the first five years, we had four identical weekend services in the original church building and helped launch six other Fellowship Bible Churches in other areas of the Dallas Metroplex, including Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship pastored by Dr. Tony Evans. Unexpectedly, we also began to see a number of other Fellowship Bible Churches spontaneously come into existence beyond the Dallas area. What was particularly rewarding and encouraging was that many of these church planters used the principles outlined in the original edition of this book.

Three Perspectives

The metaphorical structure for this book emerged over a process of time as I engaged in this fresh ecclesiological research with my students. I was also greatly encouraged that several other faculty members joined us in this exciting adventure. And as the process unfolded, I also shared our observations and conclusions with a number of fellow pastors and missionaries, seeking their wisdom. From the beginning I was committed to engaging in this theological research in community.

A Biblical Perspective

I make no apologies regarding what was and still is my view of Scripture. I believe the Bible is God's inspired document as He used authors in a supernatural way to record His divine message for all humanity. Consequently, to

answer my students' questions regarding the relevancy of the church, I was convinced that we needed to take a fresh look at the biblical story. What does the Bible actually say about the church? And in what ways do the functions of the church in the New Testament apply to us today?

Early on in this process I also determined to focus, first and foremost, on what God says—not what others say God says! With my students I wanted to take a careful look at the biblical story apart from previous perspectives. I wanted all of us to discover more specifically God's plan for the church as recorded in Scripture without being influenced by our previous knowledge and experiences.

An Historical Perspective

Taking a fresh look at the biblical story of the church did not mean that we were going to ignore the vast number of ecclesiological perspectives that have come down to us from the church fathers, biblical exegetes and interpreters, current theologians, as well as practitioners—and even social historians. Beyond looking at biblical perspectives, I wanted my students to understand that we need to learn lessons from history to help us evaluate what we've done well, what we've not done well, and what we could do better.

As stated, I wanted this to be the secondary goal. First and foremost, I wanted to look carefully at the way the apostles, other New Testament leaders, and all believers carried out the Great Commission as recorded in Scripture. In other words, divinely inspired church history [the Bible] flows naturally into extrabiblical church history, which can help us understand and evaluate what happened to local churches following the New Testament era. What should we emulate and what should we discard? And when we emulate what others have done, how can we do it better?

A Cultural Perspective

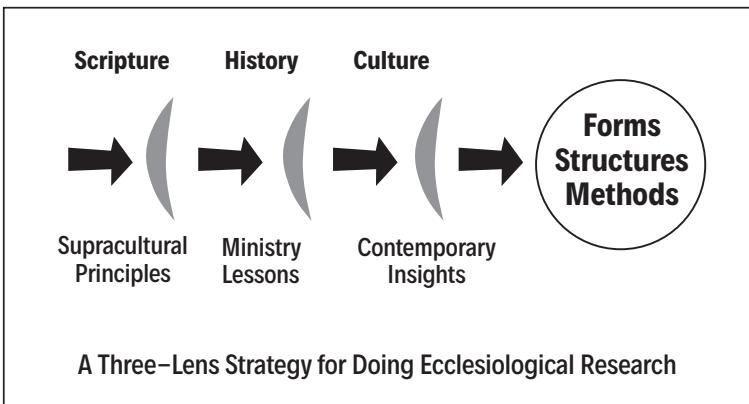
Cultural perspectives and historical perspectives certainly overlap. We cannot understand the biblical story of the church effectively without understanding New Testament cultures. This is an important part of accurate biblical exegesis and hermeneutics. But to apply scriptural truth effectively, we also need insights regarding the multitude of cultures in the

world. And we certainly need to understand our own cultures when we're attempting to carry out the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ.²

A Three-Lens Metaphor

At some point during this research with my students and fellow professors, I began using what I called the Lens of Scripture, the Lens of History, and the Lens of Culture to communicate how to gain biblical, historical, and cultural insights. This not only resonated with my students, but I quickly discovered it helped both local church leaders and congregants, as well as church planting missionaries, to understand God's plan for the church at any moment in history and in every culture of the world. And since I found it to be helpful in my own ongoing biblical research and teaching, I've continued to use this research design.³

Please understand that it's possible to use these three lenses separately in doing ecclesiological research, but ultimately they must be used in an integrated way. In fact, the more you study ecclesiology using these three lenses, the more you will interact with all three perspectives in an interrelated fashion. But to be true to a high view of Scripture, both history and culture must be secondary. Though absolutely necessary in developing an adequate philosophy of ministry, the Word of God provides us with the only sure foundation for our thoughts and actions.



Personally, I believe that using the three-lens process in our ecclesiological studies enables us to develop an approach to local church ministry that is in harmony with God's revealed will in Scripture. This research model guides us in developing forms, structures, and methods that are culturally relevant and also in harmony with biblical functions and principles. In summary, this is what *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* is all about.

A Question for Thought and Discussion

What can happen when church leaders develop forms and structures by looking through the lens of culture and neglecting the lens of Scripture?

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