

Mission and Vision 2017
Musings and Motivations in Light of 175 Years of Ministry

Introduction

175 years ago, cars and planes did not exist. Nor did radios or televisions. Penicillin had not yet been discovered. No world wars had been fought. The Southern Baptist Convention did not even exist 175 years ago, but, in God's infinite wisdom, a small group of roughly 19 Baptist in south Arkansas, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, organized the First Baptist Church of Camden. At the time of its founding, the town was full of saloons, taverns, and a multitude of people who utilized the Ouachita River to receive their merchandise and mail in the new settlement. It was in this industrious and morally questionable context that this church began its ministry.

Under the leadership of its first pastor, Rev. Searles, the Baptist Church of Camden joined with other likeminded churches in the area and organized the Liberty Baptist Association. These churches considered themselves to be a part of the "regular Baptist" tradition as opposed to the "Hardshell Baptist" tradition. Whereas "Hardshell Baptist" opposed domestic and foreign mission work, Regular Baptist believed that Christ died for sinners and that salvation should be preached to everyone. The foundational conviction of First Baptist Camden, under the leadership of Rev. Searles, was that, even in a difficult town that was full of saloons and taverns, the church was here to reach those in need of salvation. This Great Commission resolve was captured well in a letter on April 6, 1848 from one of the church elders, M.M. Wallace, who wrote, "A few weeks ago, I proposed to the church to unite and hold prayer meetings weekly for the prosperity of our church and for the salvation of the lost sinners, which was agreed by all the brethren."

By 1859, Camden was the second largest city in the state, and it was predicted that the Baptist Church of Camden would be "one of the greatest in the state, serving as a center for missionary work in south Arkansas." All of this excitement and momentum would be short-lived, however, on account of the Civil War. According to records from the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, the Camden Baptist Church, as it was known at that time, disorganized. The few remaining members were greatly discouraged, but through the efforts of the convention leaders, the church reorganized in 1868, but, after an exceedingly brief pastorate under Rev. Candler, was pastorless until 1871.

For the next few decades, the church vacillated between different buildings and different pastors, until a "new-born feeling" came upon the church under the leadership of Dr. William M. Wright. The same evangelistic zeal that marked the church at its founded was demonstrated in Dr. Wright, who was personally committed to sharing the gospel to the lost in the city. Another pastor of great significance during this period was Rev. Grover Prince, who challenged the church to "Attempt great things for God and expect great things from God." He, like Dr. Wright, and Dr. T.L. Harris who would follow him, was convinced of the importance of sharing the gospel and caring for people in the community.

Another "new-born feeling" came upon the church under Dr. Harris' 16 year-long ministry at First Baptist Camden. His commitment was to "always preach the true gospel, and, to the best of his ability, try to live as he preached."

During Dr. Harris' tenure, hundreds of people came to know Christ as their savior and were baptized (505 in the span of 6 years), several churches were planted in Ouachita county (Calvary, Grace, Eagle Mills), student ministry was prioritized, community service was embraced as an indispensable aspect of church life, volunteers were mobilized, the music was "upgraded," revival meetings were attended, and racial barriers were broken down as Dr. Harris met to train African American ministers in the area.

In the years that followed, the church would see high times and low times. Attendance would rise and fall. Finances would rise and fall. Buildings would rise and fall. It seems as though the church was always addressing issues related to its building, constantly asking questions about finances, and thinking through how best to accommodate its methods of ministry for the mission that God had given them. Whether it was under the leadership of Dr. David Uth, Dr. Mike Seabaugh, or Dr. Richard Piles, there were times of feasting and times of famine. There were times of encouragement and times of discouragement. There was unity and there was conflict. And this will most certainly be the case under my tenure as senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Camden.

There will be times of blessing and there will be times of despair. Feelings will be hurt, and relationships will be reconciled. Stores will open and stores will close. Some will take their first breath while others takes their last. People will move to town. People will move away. Members will leave the church and guests will join the church. Such changes are just part of not only church life, but just life in general.

So what are we to do? Is there anything that we can learn from our heritage that will equip us for the future at First Baptist? Is there anything about our history that can grant us a clearer understanding of our mission and vision?

Explanation

I believe there are at least five (5) things we can learn:

I. Trials will still come.

In **John 16:33**, Jesus spoke to his disciples, saying, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." In **2 Timothy 3:12**, Paul wrote to Timothy, saying "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." In other words, if you want a trial-free life, full of ease and comfort, don't follow Jesus! Jesus did not come to die to give you your best life now. He called his disciples to "take up their cross, and follow him!" Over the course of its 175 years of ministry in Ouachita county, First Baptist Church of Camden has seen its share of trials and tribulations, and, should Christ tarry in returning, it will continue to see trials and tribulations for the next 175 years of its ministry, if we are faithful to Christ.

II. Changes will still occur.

In **Ecclesiastes 3**, the preacher tells us that for everything there is a time and a season. “A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and to pluck up what is planted, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to break down and time to bind up, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance. There is a time to embrace and time to refuse to embrace, a time to seek and a time to lose, a time to keep and a time cast away, a time to tear and a time to sew, a time to keep silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.”

The apostle Paul understood this so well when he wrote about his own ministry, which should be a model to us. In **1 Corinthians 9:19-23**, Paul stated, “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.” Paul cared more about seeing people come to know and love Christ than he cared about keeping up the traditions and the customs. Paul didn't care if a guest visiting the church in Corinth sat in his seat. He didn't care if they didn't dress to his preference. He didn't care if they didn't know how to act in church. He simply cared that they were there, connecting with other people and coming to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

In many ways, this is our heritage at First Baptist Camden as well. Our church has constantly been changing and adapting to reach the lost. I must say that one of the most refreshing things about pastoring a 175-year-old church is that when people say things like, “We've always done it that way,” I can smile, because it is patently false. There may be things that we have always done, but we have not and will not always do them a certain way. In fact, that phrase, “we've always done it that way,” may be one of the most dangerous statements that an organization could ever allow to go unchallenged. The organization that is not willing to make methodological changes that do not compromise the integrity of the mission in order to fulfill its objective is an organization that is destined for death. Paul understood this, that if he didn't become like the Jew, he would not reach them and that if he did not become like the Gentile, he would not reach them either. The same must be true for FBC Camden as well. Like the multitude of predecessors before me, I want to lead us to make the appropriate changes that will empower us to reach the people that Christ has died for us to reach. I know this is John's desire as well, so I beg you to pray for us, support us, and follow us as we lead and as we think and dream and believe God for great things in our church and in our community, which leads to the third point...

III. God will still be God.

While trials and tribulations will certainly come and changes will inevitably and necessarily occur, God will not change! **Malachi 3:6** so clearly declares, “For I the LORD do not change!” And in **Numbers 23:19**, we read, “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” And regarding Jesus, we find in **Hebrews 13:8**, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” In the midst of all the chaos, in the middle of all the change, there is a Rock, God himself, who does not move! He does not sleep, rather, He keeps watch over us. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, loving, kind, patient, merciful, gracious, and longsuffering. Do you know how many time God has changed in the 175-year history of First Baptist Church? Not a single time! Never! Not even once. Not even for a moment! The God of our high times is still God in our low times! He does not change! He is still God!

IV. The Gospel will still be Good News.

Not only will God still be God, but the Gospel will still be Good News. 175 years ago, our church family forefathers looked upon a city full of people in need of salvation. This church was birthed on mission! No one said, “You know, I sure would like a place to visit with my friends, hear my favorite songs, read my favorite bible stories, and take my children so that I can have a break occasionally. We ought to start a church here.” Rather, 19 Baptists, bible-believing, Christ-loving, gospel-preaching Christians looked upon a city that was in need. It would be difficult, but the difficult would not dissuade them from the calling. The people would be hard to reach. They would have different interest. They would come from all different parts of the country. But these 19 people believed that the gospel of Jesus Christ, the message of Christ’s life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension for sinners, was powerful enough to overcome all the difficulty! They “attempted great things for God while expecting great things from God!” They believed that if Christ could rise from the death, then there was not a sinner in town that was outside of the power of God’s saving grace. So they organized the church, but instead of becoming a holy huddle that never got outside of the literal and figurative walls of the church, they lived their life on mission for God with the gospel of Christ readily on their lips. They weren’t perfect. They made mistakes. They fumbled through their gospel presentations. But over time, as they sowed the seed of the gospel, God was kind and in His sovereignty, He brought forth fruit that remained!

Brothers and sisters, not only is our God the same God that was with these early Christians in Camden, the gospel of God’s grace and forgiven by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone is the same gospel that we believe and we preach. And so you are there in the pew this morning or you are listening to this sermon on the radio or you are watching it on the internet and you are thinking to yourself, “You know, pastor, I hear you, but I’ve got a family member, or a friend, or a co-worker that is hopelessly addicted to some substance. Or they struggle with sexual immorality. Or they are cheating on their spouse. Or they are full of hatred and bitterness. Or they are greedy. Or they worship money and success. Or they are completely self-sufficient and have no need of God. Do you really believe that people like this can be saved? Do you really believe they can change? It just seems to rare, pastor. Do you think its possible” Please hear me this morning:

These are exactly the people who will change, but it will not be because they got wiser or smarter or just exerted more willpower. If they change, it will be because God changed them through His gospel! We must understand this or we will never share the gospel with anyone because we will either think that everyone is good enough already and they do not need the gospel or that everyone is too bad and that there is no hope for them. Listen, everybody's spiritual prognosis is terminal apart from the good news of the gospel.

We cannot look at Camden's spiritual state and think that people are good enough or too bad to be accepted by God. We must, with the apostle Paul, believe and proclaim that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners!" Like our forbearers, we must look at Camden the way so many before us looked at Camden. A place of full of spiritually broken, needy sinners for whom Christ died and desires to save, a place of opportunity for our obedience to Christ as disciplemakers, which brings us to our fifth and final point...

V. **The Great Commission will still be our highest call.**

Trials will still come, changes will occur, God will still be God, the gospel will still be good news, and the Great Commission will still be our highest calling.

In **Matthew 28:18-20**, Jesus tells his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The final message from our commander, the LORD of all, "As you are going, make disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and by teaching them to observe all that I have command you." Following in the footsteps of Christ himself, we are called to live in obedient, sacrificial submission to the will of God by making disciples of Christ. No matter what you do in your life, your highest calling is to teach others to love and obey Christ. To live a life that neglects the command to make disciples is to live a life unworthy of the Gospel! We were saved to this end, and those who would have no desire to make disciples should examine themselves to see if they are truly and genuinely converted.

Christ's standing command until He returns is for Christians to know Him and make Him known to others. It is for the Christian to come alongside of an unbeliever and lead them to faith in Christ, but not simply stop there. They must make the commitment to teach them how to obey Christ. In other words, we come alongside of people and we teach them to pray, how to treat others, how to understand God's Word, how to love other, how to forgiven other, how to make disciples of others. Inviting people to church is good, but it is not disciplemaking nor is it evangelism. The goal is not to get people here so that I can share the gospel with them. The goal is to equip you so that you can go share the gospel with them out there! To engage people with the gospel in the everyday hustle and bustle of life. To not simple tell people how to become a Christian, but to show them through words and deeds what it means to be a Christian and how to love and follow Christ.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, the heritage of FBC of Camden, the heritage of our church is one of enduring trials and tribulations, making the necessary changes to reach the lost, trusting in the unchanging God, believing the gospel of Jesus Christ, and making disciples of all people in the power of the Holy Spirit. These were the foundational realities upon which this church was built. My charge this morning to you is to embrace them. To own them. To resolve to make them the core values of your life.

When trials come, remember that God is still God and that He is still good. His plans are to prosper you according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus. His plans are not to harm you, but rather, to conform you to the image of Christ. Do not allow the trial to derail your obedience to Christ. If things get hard, stay committed! We need you. When things get tied, honor God with the firstfruits. Stay faithful! When things are uncertain, set your mind on the things that are certain.

When changes occur, think about the reason for the change as opposed to simply thinking about the change itself. When Paul became like a gentile to reach gentiles, I'm sure it ruffled some feathers in the Jewish, Christian community. But if the change was so that more people would come to know Christ, that more people might love and embrace the Savior, then embrace the change and celebrate the change, for the eternal salvation of a lost souls is infinitely more important than the temporary and monetary discomfort than the change may cause you.

When you are tempted to believe the you or someone you know and love is without hope, remember the gospel of Christ is for sinners. And when you are tempted to doubt your purpose in life or uncertain about your significance in the church, remember the Great Commission that remains until Christ returns.

These are the things that the generations before us did, and I lay them before you this morning, challenging you in the presence of all these witnesses, to re-affirm your commitment as a member of this church to these historic and biblical principles.