

**The "E" Word: Everything You Ever Thought about Evangelism
But Were Afraid to Say
8-5-07**

Today I want us to think about the "E" word. Do you know what the "E" word is? You might think "E" stands for electronic as in e-mail or e-zine or e-pistle. But in church, the "E" word is evangelism. That word which has such a grand and glorious history, one can't help but have some reaction to it. Tell the truth, what comes to your mind when you hear the word, evangelism?

If you're like most main-line Protestants, the word conjures up images that make you a bit queasy. Maybe it evokes memories of times when someone tried to "evangelize" you. Maybe you remember a time when someone approached you to see if you are saved... to see if you believed the way they did... to find out if you see things the right way... because, to them, there is only one right way.

Maybe when you hear the word evangelism, you think about people

giving out tracts, those little pamphlets that tell how you can be saved or how you can have eternal life. Or maybe you think of TV preachers dressed in fancy clothes pounding the pulpit. Maybe you think of a revival or tent meeting with feelings high and tears flowing and people coming forward.

It does seem that most people in mainline churches struggle with the "E" word, which means they also struggle to do it. In her book, Unbinding the Gospel, Martha Grace Reese tells it like it is...

traditional mainline churches have been losing members for many years, even decades and it is time to turn that trend around, to come to understand evangelism as something positive, which means dumping those things which pose as evangelism, but really are not good news and which serve to send people running in the other direction.

Over a year ago, the Trustees here at First Christian Church gave a challenge to the board, to the members and friends, and to me and David as pastors. That challenge was to take evangelism seriously

once again. We've been doing many things over this last year to get the word out about First Christian Church. You'll recall our "God is Bigger - than -" sign that was up for many months sharing the good news message that God is bigger than we can think or imagine. We heard from many, many people how much they appreciated the sign and how much they looked forward to seeing what would be the next word/thing to think about that God is bigger than...

First Christian had a float in the last two 4th of July parades, and sold food. This year we had the Spring Luncheon at the same time as the Wild Woman Weekend, and we're going to have a booth at the Welcome for ISU students so they can know who we are and that they are welcome here. And the ideas keep coming in. The church needs all of us to be thinking of ways we can share the good news of God's love and invite people to worship with us and see if we aren't the kind of faith community they'd like to be part of. And so, David and I are going to do a sermon series on evangelism during the month of August

in order to stimulate our creativity and thinking and awareness about sharing the hope and faith that is within us with others.

Are you scared, yet? Maybe you're thinking August might be a good month to go on a trip, or to spend those last days away from Ames on Sunday, or have a root canal rather than listening to a bunch of sermons on evangelism, but I hope you'll give it a chance. Since July 2nd, there have been a couple of dozen people gathering each Monday to think together about these things. We've been reading the book, Unbinding the Gospel, to which I referred earlier, and we've been experimenting with different kinds of prayer, and we've been talking about the real nitty gritty of life, the stuff below the surface where so much of life stays, and we've been thinking in new and creative ways. But most of all, we've been growing in our relationship with God and one another and seeing how we can make God-connections with the people we meet in our daily lives; how we can see God in the other; how faith is radically relational.

The reason evangelism has had such a bad wrap is because so often it has been done badly. So often the one doing the evangelizing comes at the other as if they are a soul to be won or another point to earn toward that ticket to heaven. So often evangelism has been done out of pride or a sense in which one person has all the answers and the other just needs to receive and believe. So often it disrespects the experiences and questions and beliefs of the other. So please be clear, when David and I talk about evangelism, we do not mean any of those things.

We do not mean that we go out and win people to a certain "correct" way of thinking. We do not mean that we have all the answers and resources that others need if only they'd accept it. We don't want anyone to twist arms or pound pulpits or use their Bible as a stick to beat people with. There's no formula to follow, no three or five points to go through in order to ensure the other is truly saved. Nor is it going around inviting everyone to church. (Though I would

never tell you not to invite someone to church) Evangelism, however, is about more than that. It is about sharing on a journey. That may mean a person gets connected to this church, and that'd be great, but evangelism is about real relationship, listening, sharing the struggles and joys no matter what the end result because in sharing our faith and our struggles, in listening to the faith and struggles of another, God is revealed and the kingdom of God can be found.

In *Unbinding the Gospel*, Martha Grace Reese writes, "It's about unbinding the Good News that God adores us and everyone else, that God has shown this to us through Jesus Christ." Evangelism is being people of good news and sharing that good news in a way that respects and frees another to both hear it and experience it.

Jesus sent people out. That's a very important part of the Luke story I told to the children. Jesus sent people out into the world, into neighborhoods and towns and streets, without crutches, without a bunch of stuff - to receive the hospitality and gifts of others; to

listen and to proclaim and to heal and to offer peace. In the midst of that exchange, the kingdom of God is made real. Evangelism, you see, is as much about receiving from another as it is giving of yourself. God is made real in that exchange, in that connection.

I think that's important! Jesus does not send the disciples out to distribute the goods, or sell an idea. Jesus sends the disciples out, and first of all asks that we leave our stuff behind. Go light, that we might be open to receiving what the other has to give. Go light, that we might be open to listen authentically to the story of another, and that we might offer words of hope and encouragement and good news. You see, good news is relational. It is proclaimed through caring, listening, sharing, respecting. It is real and it touches the deep places in people's lives and it matters.

One thing that has been so often missing in evangelism is humility. Maybe that says something about the motive of evangelism. Why do evangelism? Is it to prove I am good or right? Is it to add

another star to my crown? Is it to make me look good or feel good about myself? Is it to save someone from the fires of hell? Or do I do evangelism because in listening to the story of another, in hearing about their life and struggles and joys, in sitting with the questions and sharing from my own heart and experience and allowing God to be in the midst of all of that, a bit of God's kingdom is made known, made real, and both myself and the other as we are touched with the power of God's love and grace. That vision of evangelism calls for a great deal of humility.

In Mark's gospel, we heard the story of the rich man who wanted to inherit eternal life. He asked Jesus what he must do and called Jesus, "Good teacher." I think it is interesting that Jesus first response was to attribute goodness to God alone. Jesus met this flattery with humility. The point is not Jesus' goodness, but God's, and he said so. Okay, so have you kept all the commandments? "Yes, since my youth." Great, then give of yourself for the sake of others... empty

yourself so that you can truly receive the gifts of God and others.

Because it is not about following the rules, it's about how you relate to others and to God that puts you smack in the Kingdom of God.

Evangelism is loving God with heart, mind, soul and strength. And that love which you give and the love of God which you receive bring you alive and fill your heart to overflowing. And when you have a heart overflowing with the love of God, you must share in ways big and small, in all humility, reaching out to strangers, neighbors, and even enemies.

One person put it this way, "There are many ideas of what evangelism means but mine is helping one person at a time with no thought for personal gain. If we all could just do that everyday, we would change the world and hasten in Thy Kingdom Come." May it be so. Amen.

August 12, 2007

John 16:21-24

**The Death of Church as we have known it
and why that is a good thing**

When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

Oak Cliff Christian Church in Dallas, Texas has about eighty members, none of whom are younger than 60 years of age. They travel an average of thirty minutes back to church on Sunday mornings. They no longer drive back into the church neighborhoods in which they once lived at night. The people who live in the houses the church members once owned are mostly not Caucasian. Many do not speak English. The members of Oak Cliff Christian Church have a lovely building which they love. But they no longer believe the church will thrive. They hope that, somehow, it will survive.

Back in 1957 they had about 1,500 members. The many Sunday School classrooms were full. They had multiple staff and many programs. They were proud of their history and foresaw an unblemished future.



In 1957 Ames, Iowa had about 27,000 residents. Kids went swimming in Carr Pool and watched movies in the Drive-In west of town. Live animals were kept in cages in Brookside Park. Passenger trains stopped at the depot every day. The Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts had an atomic reactor. The sidewalks on campus were as busy on Sunday morning as any other day of the week except that on Sunday morning the students wore skirts and neckties and were on their way to church.

The stop sign on the corner of 6th and Clark had a padlock on the pole so that the sign could be turned in the summer time to allow free passage of traffic, because there wasn't much traffic in the summer in those days when Ames High, across the street from First Christian Church, was shut down.

The church thrived. People sat in the balcony on Sunday mornings and the classrooms upstairs were filled. The college class sometimes had 100 students. People who have celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary met in that class, and some have stayed. Many members walked to church. They lived in the neighborhood and raised families here. They had block parties. They were in and out of each other's homes. They knew each other. Parents looked out for kids and kids were safe from dangerous strangers. Everyone assumed that those kids were the future of the church.

But they weren't. The Vietnam War came and Ames became a battlefield in its own way. The community was torn. The campus was torn. And the church was torn. Those kids left all three. It has not been the same.

And the parents moved from the neighborhood. The houses in which they'd raised their families became rental property. Neighbors no longer knew each other. Police began to be called in when there was a dispute on the block. Parents did not dare correct someone else's children. And the balcony sat empty. The classrooms moved downstairs. Ames Community Preschool, the bold and controversial initiative of the church when people questioned why anyone would need to send children out for daycare changed as increasing numbers of the children were on the tuition sliding scale and teachers required extra training for behavior problems.



The members at Oak Cliff Christian Church in Dallas had a series of opportunities to change but they refused them all. A much needed magnet school wanted to rent the unused Sunday School classrooms but was refused. An after-school tutoring program was rejected. Conversations with two other Disciple congregations in the area were terminated when the topic came to selling buildings and moving

congregations. The members of the church allowed a Hispanic congregation to use the building but turned down overtures for people from the two congregations to form friendships.

Last month they put For Sale sign in the yard and closed the office. The members, good people all, are puzzled at why people in the neighborhood didn't want to join Oak Cliff Christian Church. It had such a grand history.

Churches, like individuals, get old. Like individuals, they have a life cycle. Like individuals, some churches enjoy a vitality into their later years, continue to learn new ways, find life fascinating and challenging. Others, like some individuals, quit somewhere along the way. Life becomes a matter of surviving.

For churches, like individuals, the moment survival becomes the issue, death has already come. If a church won't take risks, return to its core values and beliefs and build on them, take long looks at its character, it will die. And it should. God calls the church to live for the sake of the world, for the sake of the good news of love, for the sacrificial outpouring of service in the name of Jesus, for seeking of justice for those who cannot seek it for themselves. When churches forget that, members turn on one another, conflicts erupt, members leave, and traditions which once were enjoyed are held to with a vice-lock grip so that any change, no

matter how minor, is seen as threat. This has nothing to do with whether that church has a liberal or conservative theology, whether its members are educated or not, whether they put much effort into evangelism or not. Sweeping demographic changes have changed the pattern of life in this country. Some churches have caught the rhythm and are full. Others have, for a variety of very good reasons, not been transformed.

Stephen Compton, in his book, *Rekindling the Mainline*, says, "So long as local churches and aging denominational groups seek to define their futures from the successes of their past, they risk losing what is most valuable about the church. The church as an institution may survive in some form, yet the purpose of the church as a vital community of faith may be obscured by attention to membership growth, fund-raising, building maintenance and the perpetuation of once-meaningful traditions. Even when solutions to the dilemma of decline are available, strong resistance to change prevents weakening, even dying churches from changing course." (P. 32).

Before a church can face its future it must **describe** realistically the situation in which it lives and the core values which it holds. Then people **discuss**, long and hard, what they have described. Once they agree about what is of first priority then they can let go of other things which get in the way. For them to **dismantle** the barriers to being a vibrant, transformed congregation they have to pray, lots, take courage, become clear about the pain of letting go of the past and fix on the joy that God has in store for those who come to know that churches do not exist for themselves. They exist for the world for which Jesus died. Congregations are people on a

mission with a passion who claim each other in the fellowship and welcome newcomers into the heart of the community. Such churches will thrive because their members believe in them, tell others about them, stretch themselves because of them, and change the world through them.

How is all this change and dying to the old a good thing? It is a good thing because our good God is creating and re-creating. Those who have ears to hear and eyes to see find the greatest joy and excitement there is. It's like new birth. It's staying true to the important. It's following Jesus, described in the book of Hebrews as the great pioneer.

Remember how Jesus said it? He could have been talking about churches on the cusp of renewal:

When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

Amen.

What Happens In Church Doesn't Stay In Church 8-19-07

About 5 years ago the City of Las Vegas, Nevada hired Jeff Candido and Jason Hoff to come up with a tag-line for their fair city. The city wanted to promote itself, so they thought a catchy, edgy, tag-line just might be what they needed - something that would catch the imagination of people and draw them in. I'm sure they paid an enormous sum of money, but, as it turns out, it was a good investment! The tag-line these two men came up with has been an enormous hit. It has found its way into comedy routines and won awards. And more important, at least to Las Vegas, it has become part of popular culture in the same way "Where's the beef?" did for Wendy's and "Just Do It" did for Nike. So, does anyone know what the tag-line for Las Vegas is? (Pause) ***"Las Vegas: What Happens Here Stays Here."***

Well, for the city of Las Vegas, that works. It is a city known for gambling and prostitution and drinking and shows, and wedding

chapels. That tag-line works because it makes people think that they can go to Las Vegas, do anything they want, and there won't be any consequences when they get back home.

Some say that Las Vegas tag-line is descriptive of mainline protestant churches in the last several decades. What happens in church stays in church. It seems there has been somewhat of a disconnect between showing up to a church building on Sunday morning - what we do and talk about here - and what happens as good church people go about the rest of their week encountering those outside the church. And so, most mainline protestant churches like this one have been declining in membership. Many of us have been scratching our heads, wondering what's going on. Why don't we fill the balcony like we used to in the 1950's? Why don't we have a college age group that brings in 80 young people? Why don't we need the third floor classrooms on Sunday morning any more?

Since the beginning of July a group of us have been reading the

book Unbinding the Gospel by Martha Grace Reese. She has done considerable research on mainline protestant churches and evangelism. She writes how we got spoiled by the fact that church used to be so much a part of culture that it was absorbed by church-goers and non-church-goers alike. It's just not that way any more. There are many people who grow up without church, or who leave because they don't think they can use their mind and believe all the stuff they think you have to believe in order to come to church, or who got bored and leave because it just didn't seem to make a difference in their lives, and there are those who simply do not feel they would be accepted by the good and righteous church people because of who they are.

So maybe we need Jeff Candido and Jason Hoff to come up with a tag-line for the church. I don't think the one they came up with for Las Vegas would help us, so we're going to have to think of something else. But, in order to come up with that edgy, imagination stimulating, evocative phrase that will draw people in, we need to think a minute

about who we are and why we exist. So let's turn to the one we follow - to Jesus. Maybe there is a clue in his life and teachings and ministry that could be helpful to us as church. Our scripture this morning will do nicely.

The story of the woman at the well has some very significant elements which speak volumes about what it means to be the people of God. So, let's take a look.

First of all, it is important to note that Jews and Samaritans were not on friendly terms. If you grew up in the church you have warm fuzzies when you hear the word Samaritan because of Jesus' story of the "Good Samaritan." But Jews didn't like Samaritans because they were non-Israelites brought in during the exile, taught the law and the prophets, but they were not part of the Abrahamic lineage. So, good Jews didn't associate with Samaritans. But, here is Jesus who had to travel through Samaria on his way back to Galilee. He comes to Jacob's well, which for Jews would represent history and

tradition of the people, and asks a woman for some water. Now this woman wasn't born yesterday. So she questions Jesus. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" And Jesus launches into a beautiful sermon about living water. But the point I want us not to miss is that this woman assumes a man such as Jesus would have nothing to do with her, both a Samaritan, and a woman. That's two strikes against her in that culture. Jesus surprises her. Not only does he speak to her, he is willing to share her cup!

In the course of their conversation, Jesus acknowledges that this woman has had many husbands and is currently with a man who was not her husband. Again, the Samaritan woman is surprised and amazed that this Jewish man knows so much about her and that what he knows doesn't seem to keep him from offering her words of hope and encouragement. He does not bring judgment. He brings understanding and compassion. There is no pretense between them. Neither is there condescension on Jesus part. Rather there is respect and care. That

Jesus knows who she is, that he speaks with care and compassion and hope, that he doesn't seem concerned about his reputation, all these things reveal the Good News of God's love. So she left her water pitcher and went to tell all her friends and neighbors, and they, in turn wanted to meet and talk with Jesus, too.

There is another very important thing that Jesus said to the Samaritan woman. In Jesus' day there was a disagreement between the Jews and the Samaritans about the necessity of worshiping in the temple in Jerusalem. The Jews believed that the faithful must go to Jerusalem and go through the priest to make an offering in order to be right with God. But here, in this conversation Jesus proclaims that the time has come when it does not matter where you worship, only that you worship in Spirit and Truth. In other words, God is not confined to some place.

God is out among the people and anyone can worship God anywhere! That is a BIG, new idea! What was "signature" about Jesus

is that he was a man on the move. He hit the road sharing God's love and grace with anyone he encountered, in their own context, on their terms, with love and respect toward the stranger, toward the other.

Jesus vision was one of tearing down walls and crossing artificial boundaries people had set up which kept God from people.

Jesus created church wherever he went. He worshiped God as he encountered people, real people with real stories. Jesus worshiped God as he listened, as he spoke, as he allowed his life to be touched by the lives of others. That's the kind of real-world evangelism people need these days. Out there, meeting people where they are.

The founder of the Vineyard Church understands this very well. A tag-line he uses is: "Sharing God's love in practical ways." People from that church are found on the streets, washing windshields at stop lights, handing out rolls of toilet paper in neighborhoods. But it's not just the Vineyard church. I recently heard of a couple of Disciples churches who stand at busy corners in the early morning hours

offering coffee to people on their way to work. The point of evangelism is to share *God's* love. Jesus' mission was to share *God's* love. And that's what's behind our new sign in the church yard. We want to proclaim that *God's* love knows no boundaries and cannot be contained. It is out there and moving and mysterious and alive!

So, what do you think a good tag-line would be? I called my sermon, "What Happens in Church *Shouldn't* Stay In Church". The church is not meant to be contained within a building. It is a living, breathing, moving, changing thing. It is people, relating, growing, encountering *God* in diverse and surprising ways - a *God* who is too big to be put in a box, too awesome to be contained in a few statements of belief, too loving to not see the good in every person.

Church is with us when we go from this building. We create church in our homes and workplaces and neighborhoods as we reach out in love, as we open ourselves to those, like the Samaritan woman, who society puts at the bottom. Church happens when we offer small acts

of kindness just because. When we listen. When we offer smile or word of encouragement. When we refrain from judgment. When we graciously receive the hospitality of another. When we see Christ in each person we meet.

Okay, so how about this: The tag-line for the church in the 21st century could be a phrase from that 1970's hit song by the Doobie Brothers... "Taking it to the streets" After all, isn't that what Jesus did? Come on, what are we waiting for? Amen.

**I am
the
church!**

**You are
the
church!**

**We are
the
church
together!**

**All who
follow
Jesus,**

**All
around
the
world!**

**Yes,
we're the
church
together.**

**The church
is not a
building,**

**The church
is not a
steeple,**

**The church
is not a
resting place,**

**The church
is people...**

August 26, 2007

Hebrews 13:1-8

Rebirthing the Church - Unbinding the Gospel

- Jesus unbound Lazarus and commanded him to come out of the tomb.
- The Philistines unbound Samson and he pulled down the pillars of the house show the power of God.
- The Babylonians bound Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and threw them into the furnace of blazing fire to taunt the power of God.
- The woman, her hair all unbound, came in and wept over Jesus, showing her faith and love.
- What we, in the church, *bind* on earth is bound in heaven, (said Jesus), and what we *loose* on earth is loosed in heaven.

Dare we believe it?

Many do not.

Many prefer a tamer version of faith that *expects no miracles*,

that *raises up no storm* of opposition because there is no power of mighty works done in the name of Jesus.

I dare to believe that when the *gospel is unbound* -

when the *grace of God* is released in the church -

when the *hearts of the faithful* are bound over to the Lord under whose orders we march -

then the *wounds of the injured* are healed,

the *sorrows of the brokenhearted* are soothed,

the *sins of the evil* are forgiven,

and we, like the man possessed by demons that destroyed his life are *restored in right relationship* in the community where we live when Jesus destroys the powers that bind.

It is the work of the church:

in the name of Jesus Christ,

to **restore** people into right relationship with others and with God whose love is stronger than the ropes of Philistines, Babylonians, or the social condemnation that divides us up into good and bad, proper and scandalous, powerful and impotent and whatever other human divisions there may be.

God's redeeming love overpowers even **DEATH**,

and under the invitation of Christ,

we come marching forward from the tombs and pits which entrap us.

I *hardly* can dare to believe it.

When the *gospel is unbound* among us our *prayers sing* among us.

When the *gospel is unbound* among us the *strength of our unity empowers* us.

When the *gospel is unbound* among us the work we do, in Jesus' name, in the community and beyond *glorifies God*.

No one can unbind the gospel **alone**.

We need **all** of us - for unbinding is always an act of community.

The gospel comes unbound in Bible studies when groups pour over the Word of God as it comes shining forth out of the words of the Bible.

The *gospel comes unbound* in small groups where people pour out their stories to one another, seeing the ways God has been at work in their lives, being united in the bonds of Christian fellowship that lift us up, make us strong, set us free.

The *gospel comes unbound* in the things we do: serving a meal to the community, gathering up the family of the brokenhearted at a funeral and sitting down at the tables of fellowship, putting food in empty stomachs and gasoline in empty tanks, praying with the down-and-out so they can learn to look up-and-in to the places where God dwells.

The *gospel comes unbound* every time we take a step of faith, despising the dangers, for the sake of following Jesus who leads us into the most unlikely places and puts us in relationship with the most unlikely people.

God **loves** unbinding those things that are bound up.

- Jesus even talked about unbinding the prisoners and setting them free.
- Jesus even walked, unbound, out of the tomb where they'd laid him - our best hope that the powers of God destroy even the powers of evil -

our best hope that the way he laid out before us is the way we can trust, no matter what happens to us along that way.

Following Jesus unbinds us.

Dare we believe it?

Following Jesus means we become faithful stewards of our money, time, energies - giving an accounting to how we have used up this life God gives us.

Following Jesus means we don't bow down before

- gods of greedy consumerism, or the
- lords of lustful exploitation, or the
- demons of wrathful vengeance-seeking, or the
- idols of lazy inattention, or the
- spirits of jealous mean-spiritedness, or the
- wraiths of vainglorious self-serving, or the
- gluttonous ghouls of exploitation of the earth's bounty and resources.

And, as far as we *inside* the church have to go in our spiritual walk, those *out there* in the world with limited understandings of redeeming grace have an even greater journey.

It is the work of the church to share the good news.

We cannot do it alone.

It takes the *whole lot* of us for the gospel to be unbound among us

that what we bind up and what we set free are real things
that turn people's heads
and release God's love in people's hearts.

Frankly,

as wonderful as is the fellowship, courage, graciousness and strength of
this congregation, we could be more.

We haven't arrived at the Promised Land of God's kingdom yet.

There are steps we could take together that would carry us deeper into the
kingdom of God - for the sake of the world for whom Christ died.

Your leaders: elders, deacons, trustees, officers of the board and pastors
owe the rest of us opportunities and encouragement to become that *more*.

- We owe you Bible study and prayers in groups.
- We owe you opportunities to take the gospel to the streets.
- We owe you the encouragement to create the climate of hospitality
where spirits may flourish, the unloved become lovely and the high and
mighty become humane and true-hearted.

But you owe your leaders back something as well.

- You owe your following. When they offer you studies or opportunities or
projects or gatherings, you need to respond positively.
- You owe your best efforts and deepest praises and earnest passions and
greatest wisdom.

Your leaders intend for this congregation to be a dynamic faith community ten, twenty, a hundred years from now.

We build on the foundations of faith given to us by our ancestors who built a building of brick and charm right through the depression when there was no money to pay, but persevered with a dream of a church to glorify God at 6th and Clark.

We build on the heritage of Sunday School teachers and evangelists who welcomed in the young and old, who gathered up children from the neighborhood and students from the university and created something valuable, something life-changing, world-changing where the gospel is unbound and set loose from Ames to go to the farthest corners of the earth.

I extend to *every one* of us an invitation which will transform the *whole* of us... for *none* of us can do this thing alone and *all* of us depend on the leading, uplifting and empowering of God.

It will make us more the church rebirthed in the gospel that *delights* God,

- as *powerful* as a woman's love as she weeps over the feet of her Lord,
- as *amazing* as the prophets walking through the fires of death,
- as *hopeful* as the unbound corpse of Lazarus stumbling from the tomb,
- and as *joyous* as Jesus appearing again, again, again to those who love him, showing them, not just the scars of his hands and feet but the glories of God, unbound, unstoppable even by the old enemy death.

I didn't make up the plan. It comes straight out Hebrews. Maybe you'd want to take out a pew Bible and check for yourself. It's on page 217 of the New Testament. These are normal steps that any person can decide to do.

1. **Let mutual love continue.** In other words, stay on good terms with each other. Respect each other because respect builds up love. Young people: when you invite a friend to church with you, do it confidently because you know that at church nobody will say anything unkind to your friend. Never.
2. **Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.** Every church thinks it is friendly. Most are not. It means we bend over backwards, extend ourselves honestly to welcome visitors. We greet people in the parking lot and invite them to dinner. We don't let newcomers sit alone in coffee fellowship or at dinner, because we are in the business of unbinding God's gospel and letting gospel power rebirth the church. So, we look out for needs and are ready with a bed, or a meal, or a flower when needed. Sometimes we end up showing hospitality to an angel that way, but that's okay too. Maybe everyone is someone's angel.
3. **Remember those who are in prison** as though you were in prison with them, those who are being tortured, as though you were being tortured. Some of us have been tortured. Some know well what abuse does. Rather than fearing prisoners whose stories we do not know why couldn't we go to the jail and pray? Why couldn't we make a welcome place for those who society shuns? Why couldn't we unbind the gospel in those most in

need, for the sake of salvation in this life? We could you know.

4. **Let marriage be held in honor by all**, let the marriage bed be kept undefiled. We all know horror stories about infidelities in churches and the havoc wreaked. Don't do that here. Go to the training for the protection of children if you want to work with them here. Help all of us keep healthy boundaries in our relationships here so that families are strengthened and marriages flourish and people thrive here.

5. **Keep your lives free from the love of money** because God will take care of us. The love of money is the source of Greed which destroys the soul. Greed breeds fear and fear fights faith and the gospel is *bound* in human distrust of God's protective power. If we refuse the seduction of material things and offer a worthy stewardship to God we'll give 10%, save 10% and spend the rest with joy and thanksgiving. We'll be part of the redemption of the world because we're putting food in empty bellies and hope in the prisoners' hearts and comfort in the souls of the forlorn.

6. **Remember your leaders**, who speak the word of God to you, consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. If your leaders are true to you then be true back in return, because all of us trust the way of Jesus who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Now here's the plan. There are five steps.

1. **Practice radical hospitality**. Invite people to Christ and this church and when they get here reach out to them. Introverts do it in an introvert's

way. Extroverts reach out in an extravert's way. The thing is, angels may be here... or someone needing the transforming power of the unbound gospel releasing God's love in their life.

2. **Worship with passion.** Expect a fresh encounter with God because it is God's great joy to transform our lives. Sing. Is that so difficult? Singing is a form of praying and actually participating lifts up everybody else. The dead spots in the sanctuary when we are praising God, frankly, frighten me. What if some angel is here and goes away saying that the Spirit has not made her way here, that the gospel is bound up in our fears here, that we have no joy here.
3. **Work at deepening personal faith.** We don't get mature faith automatically. It takes effort, discipline, practice. We don't do it alone. We need small groups where we study, share and care.
4. **Create a climate where we take risks for mission.** When we follow Jesus we find ourselves in strange places: the homeless shelter, the Hospice house, the hospital, the classroom, the gambler's group, the AA group, all over the place. For the sake of the world we need to be taking on some *risky* mission and service. It will unbind the gospel. It will rebirth the church. Angels will rejoice and God will redeem.
5. **Practice extravagant generosity** - sharing that exceeds all expectations. I'm asking all who agree to pray about what extravagant generosity means and for the courage to respond. Anything less than extravagance is under

our control, more like the disciples who criticized the woman with hair unbound than the woman who is remembered forever for what she did for her Lord.

Will the deacons please distribute the five-step **HEBREWS UNBINDING THE GOSPEL AND REBIRTHING THE CHURCH** sheet. When you get yours, please sign your name to the things you will agree to. Put the page in one of the baskets at the doors as you leave. We will mail your sheet back to you as a reminder of your promise.

It's God's church. We have the great privilege of walking together in faith, God's gift. You are a magnificent people, gifted by God. The world is waiting. God bless you.

HEBREWS UNBINDING THE GOSPEL AND REBIRTHING THE CHURCH

1. **I will practice radical hospitality.** I will invite people to Christ and this church and when they get here I will reach out to them.

Signed: _____

2. **I will worship with passion.** I will expect a fresh encounter with God in worship, I will sing and pray and commune and give, trusting that it is God's great joy to transform my life.

Signed: _____

3. **I will Work at deepening personal faith.** I will participate in a small group, take on a spiritual discipline, join a prayer circle, etc.

Signed: _____

4. **I will help create a climate where we take risks for mission.** I will be open to new mission as God shows us and support that to which I feel called by God.

Signed: _____

5. **I will practice extravagant generosity** - I will share in a way that exceeds all expectations. I promise to pray what form that sharing will take.

Signed: _____