

The Cross-Centered Church (Birmingham Conference)

by Gary Wilkerson

Gary Wilkerson emphasizes the necessity of a cross-centered approach in church life to address challenges and foster genuine community.

Duration: 29:44

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Acts 4:12, Romans 1:16, 1 Corinthians 1:18, 1 Corinthians 2:2, 1 Corinthians 15:3, Galatians 6:14

Topics: "Cross of Christ"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on his love for the church despite its chaos and conflicts. He ponders on how to bring about change and make the church work as God intends. The speaker emphasizes the importance of being steadfast in spirit and fixing one's heart on God. He also shares his experience at a conference where he learned about church design and reaching lost people, but felt overwhelmed by the task. The speaker ends by questioning why God gave him the desire for change without providing the necessary skills and vision to fulfill it.

Transcript

Glad you're with us. Can you hear me? Am I turned on here? Got me? Got the volume here? All right. Praise God.

Turn with me, if you would, to the book of 1 Corinthians and the second chapter. I want to talk to you about the cross-centered church. A lot of ideas about how to do church today, isn't there? A lot of conferences, a lot of books, a lot of tape series, a lot of programs that we could pick up in a Christian bookstore or at a different conference and find out about how to do church.

And we don't have a lot of how-to's here at this gathering. We just want to talk about Jesus. We believe He is the how-to.

He is the how-to. 1 Corinthians, if you would, chapter 2. We'll be reading from verse 2 in just a moment. Let's pray first.

Ask God to give us ears to hear. Father, we thank you in the name of Jesus that you delight to proclaim your word. You are a God who loves to speak.

We want to tell you here this morning, we are people who love to hear. So speak to us, God, that once again, we thank you for what we heard this morning. I know personally, it just really touched my heart in a deep way.

And I ask you to continue this work as you speak about the cross to your people in Jesus' precious name. Everybody say it together, amen? Amen. 1 Corinthians chapter 2, verse 2, for I received, for I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Another translation says, for I determined. Paul says, I determined to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. He was speaking to the church at Corinth.

If you have studied, which I'm sure most of you have, the life of the church that Paul was ministering, pastoring, shepherding, this was a church that had some problems. It was a church in doctrinal disputes. They varied in different ideas on how to live out the gospel.

They were a church that was in division. Some said they were Vapal or some said they were of Apollos. Some said they were of others.

And so they had conflict within. It was a church that was in moral decay. They had a sexual immorality that was named among them that Paul said, the stuff that you guys are involved in is even worse than what's going on in the world.

Welcome to the church. Every pastor in this room knows what it's like to pastor a group of people who aren't perfect, just like their pastor. We understand what it's like to have chaos, conflicts, strife, difficulties.

I personally think, I've been on the, working with my father for about 18 months now, going around the world, traveling in these pastors' conferences. It's been a great delight to be with my father. I have such a joy to work with a man of God who I see behind the scenes.

He doesn't just preach the stuff, but he lives the stuff. And that to me is the greatest testimony. That's part of the reason I'm here today.

Jesus called me and I saw a good role model in my own father. But in this past 18 months traveling with him, it's been such a great joy. But I miss the church.

I've been a pastor almost all my life. I started as a youth pastor when I was 19. Started my first church when I was 23 years old.

And I have absolutely, totally fallen in love with the Church of Jesus Christ. Now I know some of you are evangelists, and some are seminary professors, and some work with other programs, but I just want to speak to you pastors just for a moment because you've got the best job in the world. I mean you guys, you get to do it all.

I mean, you know, an evangelist comes in and preaches, then he leaves. But you get to see new believers come into the kingdom. You get to see them disciplined.

You get to see them baptized. You get to disciple people. You get to build community.

It's exciting, isn't it? Amen? But it's also extremely difficult. You got the best job in the world, but you got the most difficult job in the world. And a whole lot more you should have said amen, but you're wondering

what other people might think of you if you say amen too loud at this point.

My teenage son, when I was pastoring in Denver, Colorado, told me, Dad, I really love the church. It's just the people in it I can't stand. He kind of put in a nutshell what a lot of pastors go through.

They love the vision of the church. They love the idea of the church. They love God's heart for his church, but it's just the day-in, day-out functioning.

I remember times where the phone would ring at my house and my heart would start beating faster, because it's just another problem. It's another person that's saying the music's too loud, the music's too soft. The music's too old-fashioned, the music's too contemporary.

Your preaching's too long, your preaching's too short. You don't preach enough like Pastor Dave. You preach too much like this constant.

I didn't even want to answer the phone, and yet I still had, and to this day have, a tremendous love for the church. And Paul is describing his love for the church, even though it was a church in chaos, in conflict, in turmoil, and problem. Also, so in the middle of this church, what do I do? What program do I turn to? Can I start small groups? Can I invite somebody to come in with a deliverance ministry? Do we need Alpha Course? What do I do to make my church change and work the way God intends it to work? And so he has this, I'm sure the great thinker that Paul was could have come up with a plethora of ideas, but he says this, I fixed in my heart.

I got steadfast in my spirit. I got resolute about this one thing, and it's one thing alone. The only answer for the church of Jesus Christ, when it's in chaos, the only answer for the church of Jesus Christ, when it's in declension, the only answer for the church of Jesus Christ, when there's any situation at all that comes up in time of need, it's the cross of Jesus Christ.

Paul says, I determined. I got gritty about this, man. I clenched my fist and grit my teeth and said, nothing will dissuade me from keeping this as first and foremost.

It's the cross of Jesus Christ applied to the body of Christ that changes the life of the church. There's no greater program. There's no other solution that comes back down to the cross of Jesus Christ.

He starts the book of Corinthians this way. We don't have to turn there, but even in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, as he's concluding the letter, almost as book ends in the 15th chapter, he's saying, God gave me a message, and I'm going to deliver the message to you just as he gave it to me. And he said, this is a first importance that Christ died.

He's speaking of what again? Of the cross. He starts off by saying, I determined to know nothing else. He ends by saying, this is the first importance.

The cross of Jesus Christ should be number one on our list. That's not an experience a lot of pastors have. That's not an experience a lot of leaders in ministries have, keeping the cross of Jesus Christ first.

And Paul said, I had to determine because it's so easy to get distracted into other things, other ways of living life. Can I share a few minutes with you my own personal testimony? I started a church about 10 years ago, maybe 11 years ago, in Denver, Colorado. We met on a university campus.

We rented a building, and God blessed very quickly. There was probably about 300 people in the first few months, first year or so. The church grew real rapidly at first.

We had 300 people, and I was excited. I just was, you know, sort of like my vision was this was Times Square Church in the middle of the country. I just, you know, I just figured, you know, Times Square Church grew to five, six thousand in a couple years, and we were well on our way.

You know, six months old, and already just having to get new auditoriums. The smaller ones don't fit us anymore. I was so excited, except we got to a place in the life of our church where the church, and here's what the church growth experts use this phrase, they called your church plateaus.

I'm sure most of you pastors here have never experienced that ever happening to you before, but what they mean by plateau is the church grows, but then it hits a certain spot, and it stops growing. You no longer have, you might have new people coming, but other people are leaving, so the church stays about the same number. So for about a year into our second year of ministry, our church had plateaued.

The third year, it was about the same, and I started feeling discouraged. What's wrong with me? What's wrong with this church? Why isn't, why aren't we growing? Why aren't we seeing? I came to Denver, Colorado to build a prevailing church, to see a church that really reaches the city in powerful ways, and why are we stifled at this situation? Why are we at the same amount we were last year? And so I started looking for solutions, looking for answers, and a friend of mine said, hey, what you ought to do is go up to this conference. There's this really amazing conference.

It's up in Illinois. It's a big church, and they have wonderful ministries, and they really help you. They really can help you reach lost people, and help you grow your church bigger.

You'll reach out to people that are far from God, like, man, that sounds good to me. I'd love to see this. So I went to this conference up in Chicago, and it was an amazing conference.

Man, they were, they were like, I just got all excited about it. Wow, here's how you break from the 200 level to the 300 level, and here's how you go from the 300 level to the 500 level, and here's how you reach lost people, and here's how you do this, and here's how you design your church services. If you don't design your church services this way, then when lost people come into church, they're not going to understand what you're talking about, and they don't know these old songs, so you have to retool your whole church, reconfigure it, and restructure it, and so I was so excited.

I was thrilled. I got, and I bought all the tapes, and I bought all the books, and I had to buy an extra suitcase just going home with all the extra materials I had from this conference, and I got back to my church, and I said, guys, the reason we plateaued is because we haven't understood this seeker-sensitive mentality towards lost people, and so what we need to do is we're going to restructure. We're going to take about the next two or three months, and we're going to listen to all these, and I gave all my staff all the tapes.

I gave them all the books, and the materials, and the how-tos, and we kind of...staff members changed roles, and I trained the elders on how to be more sensitive to lost people, and I took my tie off and my shirt, and I started dressing casually, and I was like, this has got to be it. I was so excited, and about three months later, we kind of launched this new kind of church, and I was so excited because lost people came in and new people I'd never seen before. They'd heard we were doing this kind of new style of church, so

they started coming to our church, but the problem was we sort of started in a different way, just a real sort of basic Bible-believing, Holy Spirit-filled, preaching the gospel, and so when we kind of shifted gears a little bit, those people who had come to hear the Word in depth and really worship God, and have prayer meetings, and pray, and cry out to God, those people left.

So I was kind of confused as a pastor because we're still plateaued. It's just new people now. We've got, we still have 300 people.

There's 50 new people, but 50 of our old, you know, and real pillars of the church, so to speak, have left the church. So I was, so after six months, eight months, nine months, a year, we were still plateaued, but I wasn't the kind of pastor who gives up easily, so I heard about another conference out on the West Coast. This conference was even better because it didn't just, see, the problem with the previous conference was it just zeroed in on one thing, sort of reaching seekers, and so I went to this one on the West Coast, and it was much better because it wasn't just reaching one group of people.

It was like it had the whole diagram set up for us, you know? It had first base, second base, third base, home. It had, you know, and so it had discipleship and maturity, and so I went to this conference, and I'm like, this is it. Praise God, I finally found, you know, this, I feel so at home here, and I went back to my church with the new suitcase, with all the tapes, and all the strategies, the structures, the sermons, the books, the tapes, the CDs, everything, and I called the staff together, and I said, the reason we've plateaued as a church is because all's we're doing is just this seeker type of thing.

We're just reaching people far from God, but we don't disciple them, we don't nurture them, and so I started meeting with the staff. I said, we're going to retool our whole church, we're going to restructure. We're not going to be just like a seeker type church, now we're going to be purpose driven, we're going to have the whole thing now, and so my staff says, okay, that's good, let's go for it, and I changed, like we had, it wasn't that big a church, so I didn't have that big a staff.

The book recommends each base, discipleship, maturity, worship, each base has a pastor covering that area. So I had like, sort of I had two associate pastors, so I made them sort of the pastor of evangelism, the pastor of discipleship, but I didn't have a pastor for maturity, so I asked my janitor if he would help. I'm not kidding.

I asked him if he'd help because I really needed a third base covered. You can't do it right unless you have a third base covered. So, some of you may have no idea what I'm talking about here.

You've like never read any of these books or been in any of these conferences, just bear with me, we'll get back to the scriptures here in just a moment. So I got back to this conference, and I'm meeting with my staff and the elders, and we're training them. I said, in six months, we're going to launch this new kind of church, and we'll have courses, and training, and development, and so we launched it.

And it was so exciting because people heard we were having this kind of church, and so new people started coming, but you know what else happened? The seeker-sensitive people said, no, we don't want all this, like discipleship, and maturity, and response. So they left the church, but about 50 people leave the church, and we had about 50 people added to the church. So two years later now, after still struggling, striving, what's the answer, what's the solution? Two years later, I'm left now with a sort of post-seeker, purpose-driven kind of something or other church, and we're still at 300 people.

But I'm not a pastor who gives up easily. And so I went to, I kind of ran out of conferences. My story can go a lot longer.

I could take you hours through the conferences I've been to. I went to other conferences. I finally ran out of conferences in America to go to.

I even went to England, and I went to an Alpha conference. Have you ever heard of Alpha? And I thought, I came back to the church, and I said, you know what, we need to run this Alpha course. It's a 10-week course.

It's for new believers. It's for people that are, you know, and so I kind of got the staff together, and I gave them all the tapes, and all the books. And I love the guy who, the guy's name is Nicky Gumbel, who leads Alpha in England, and he just speaks so well.

So I came back, I think I even adopted a little bit of a British accent. I'm like, welcome to church this morning, everyone. So delighted to have you here today.

And it's just like a chameleon, just going from different things to different things. It's like, whatever looked good, whatever seemed exciting, whatever seemed big, whatever seemed to be growing, it's like, oh, I'll become like that. And that's exciting.

Didn't even know who to be myself. So I went to that conference and came back, and this one was, this was the toughest one, because my church was getting tired of it. And I'll never forget the day.

I'll never forget, my elders called me and said, can we meet with you tonight, Pastor Gary? I said, sure. And that's, that's probably when your pastors call you and, and, and when, excuse me, when your elders call you and say they need to meet with you. I mean, that's, you know, usually something's wrong.

And, and so we got to meeting that night, and the first elder, kind of the head elder, he said, Pastor Gary, we, we love you. Now, you know, something really bad's wrong. Something's, you're, you know, your job is on the line when they start off, we really love you.

And so, so they said, we love you, but, but we just noticed something. We, we're, we're confused. We, we don't know whether we're seeker sensitive, seeker friendly, seeker hostile.

We, we don't know whether we're Baptist or Pentecostal. We don't know whether we're purpose driven, alpha driven, cell group driven. Two years ago, we were a church with small groups.

Now we're a church of small groups. One, one of the elders had heard there's, there's this new thing happening down in South America where everybody meets in groups of 12. They said, please don't go to South America.

And, and they, they just said, yeah, we love you, and we think you're a good pastor, and we know you have a good heart. We see, under the surface of all this, we see a love for Jesus and a love for a church, but, but we're really confused. We just don't, and, and then the, the, there's one of our elders is fairly wealthy, and he said, Pastor Gary, I'll do anything for you.

I will give you two weeks paid vacation. I will, I will buy you a new car, he told me. He says, but please just promise me you'll never go to another conference ever again.

So, so I was, I was, but, but I'm not the kind of pastor that gets, gives up easily, so. So I didn't take their advice, and I, and I went to one last conference. This is now probably over a five year time period, and, and I'm getting discouraged.

And I really am. It's, none of the people that helped us start, I've been through like five different churches already. We were sort of Pentecostal when we started, then we became secret sensitive, then purpose driven, then alpha, then cell group, and then, and it's like, and I, the church is now, you know, six, seven, eight years old.

It's still 300 people, but none of the people that were there, you know, a year ago are there anymore. It's a whole brand new group of people, and it's, I don't, this is tough, and I was, I mean, I was, I was truly discouraged. This is hard.

This is not working. I have a dream in my heart of what the church could be like. I know there's, there's something that God's after in this church.

There's, there's, there's, there's something in my soul that says the church could be more than this. There's something in my heart that says, says God can really build in any city a prevailing church that really does touch the lost, that really does build disciples, that really understands what it's like to have true, genuine Christian community. And I, I know the dream is there, God, but I'm not seeming to be able to get it done.

But I didn't give up, and I went to one more conference, not taking the advice of my elders. And, and this conference was, was different than the others. They weren't presenting a program or a how-to, and it should have been very encouraging for me, but I remember sitting in that conference and just thinking, oh, now I get it.

Because I looked up on the stage, and there was like a 200-voice choir. And, and when the preachers got up, they were, they were powerful and anointed and eloquent and, and just, there were sermons like I've never heard before. Wow, that, and it just hit my heart.

And I just began to almost weep there in my chair. I just said, that's what it is. I mean, I, I can't do this.

I can't preach like these guys preach. I can't build a choir like these guys have built this kind of choir. I don't have the kind of, if, if I had a choir like that, everybody in my church would be in the choir.

When I, I'd have like, there'd be nobody out there. I'd have to turn and preach to the choir. The choir is bigger than my church.

And I was just, I was, it was like, like the proverbial thing, the straw that broke the camel's back. I was broken. It was, that was it.

I'm finished. Because I just said, I realized for the first time, it's, it's not the style of church. It's not the structure of the church.

It's not the program you use. I realized for the first time, it was, and I was wrong, but here's my thinking. It's not, there's no program out there good enough because I'm not good enough.

And I remember saying to myself, or Satan said to me, I don't know what it was, but it was, you don't have what it takes. You're not good enough. You're not eloquent enough.

You're not powerful enough in your leadership. You're changing all the time. People are confused, leaving your church.

They're scattered. You, you, you, you've done nothing but cause trouble. And I was just so frustrated.

I said, you know, if that's what it takes to, to have a super choir and, and the most skilled musicians in the world and the most eloquent preaching, and I don't have what it takes, I might as well just give up. And I walked out of the middle of that conference and I went back to my hotel room. I'll never forget it.

I got down on my face on the carpet in that room and I said, God, why did you put this burden in my heart? Why did you give me this desire and this passion and then not give me the skill and the ability and the vision and the, and the fortitude and the wisdom to be able to see it through, to, to make it come to fruition? Why did you put something in my heart that, that I don't have what it takes to make happen? I just began to get frustrated. Have you ever gotten angry at God? I, I have never got so angry at God. I literally shook the angry fist at God.

You, I used some of the words of scripture to describe it, but I could have just as easily used words of the street language because the anger in my heart was rising. And I just said, God, you like Jeremiah said, you, you've deceived me and I was deceived. You seem to work against me rather than for me.

You're blessing all these people. Look at these guys at this conference I've just been listening to. Look at the ones in Chicago.

Look at the ones in California. I remember singing this song when I was a young man. Do you remember the song? Pass me not oh gentle savior.

Hear my humble cry while on others thou art falling. Do not pass me by. And I was crying on that carpet in that hotel room saying, God, you passed me by others.

You have fallen on others. You have loved others. You have blessed, but you just passed me by.

And then the words came to me, Jacob, I have loved Esau. I have hated. I said, God, do you hate me? Am I an Esau to you? Have I done something to you that has caused you to put a carrot out in front of me, a hope and a dream and a desire and then not allow me to see it through? I would have rather you not called me at all than for you to call me and then let me see the thing that I felt you called me to.

Have I become an Esau to you? In that hotel room, all of a sudden, something changed. I mean, it's oftentimes I realized that it was at that point my life changed. I mean, I have a testimony.

I can tell you I was saved when I was six years old at one of my father's meetings when I was preaching. I have a testimony I can tell you when I got filled with the Holy Spirit and baptized. I was 18 years old, which is really late when you grow up in a Pentecostal church.

My whole church was fastened and praying for me. He's 18 and he doesn't even speak in tongues. What's wrong? And I can tell you all those different testimonies, but my real testimony is on that carpet in my face because it's when God broke me.

And in some senses, He almost agreed with my argument, you don't have what it takes. And all along, you thought you did. If you could just learn the right methodology, you thought you had what it takes if you could just get the right staff together, if you could just institute the right program, if you could just have the

right style, if you could just lead people the right way, that your skill, your eloquence, your powerful leadership, your giftedness can see you through to make your dreams come true.

And that's an American gospel that's damnable. An American gospel that says, just dream it and rub the magic lantern and God will come out and give you everything you want. But what God wants to do is to take His servants and break them.

Oh God, give me a broken contrite heart. Oh God, give me a heart that says, God, I don't care about numbers anymore. God, give me a heart that says, I don't care about success any longer.

What I care about is having a heart after God. And I got up from that hotel room and I said, God, do you, I feel like quitting. Matter of fact, I told you on my knees right here in this room that I quit.

I don't wanna have any, I'm gonna be a good Christian, but I'm not gonna, I'm gonna quit the ministry. I'm gonna quit church. I'm not gonna do this anymore.

By the time I got up, I was a changed person. I felt like Jacob when, my dad was speaking about Jacob earlier. I felt like Jacob when Jacob was at that point of wrestling with God and God said, let me go, let it go.

And I felt like God was saying to me, it's not just a fight you're having with me right now. It's a fight you've been having with me your whole life. And Jacob was a wrestler and God said, the Lord said to him, let it go.

It wasn't just saying, you're beating me up, like my dad said last night. It's not just that you're beating me up and please let me go. It's like, let this war go.

Quit the wrestling. And I just took a deep breath. And I went back to my church and they were scared.

Like, uh-oh, he just got back from another conference. But I think the first thing they noticed is I didn't have any tapes. I didn't have any books.

And I didn't call the staff together. I didn't call the elders and tell them we're going to change. I just changed on the inside.

People ask me, what do you think of Willow Creek? What do you think of Saddleback? What do you think of this movement, that movement? I think we do what we're called to do when God calls us to do it. I let them do what they do. But I changed that day because I no longer want to be Bill Hybels.

I no longer want to be Rick Warren. I no longer want to be David Wilkerson. I want to be Gary Wilkerson, the man of God.

God called me to be. And the Lord set me free. He set me so free.

And I just, I didn't change anything in the church. We didn't do a whole new routine or policy set up or anything like that. I just kind of started getting back to knowing Jesus, loving Him, being a friend of God.

And all of a sudden, people in my church said, hey, there's something different about you. There's not a confusion. There's a clarity.

You're not trying to be something else or somebody else. You're just being what God's called this church to be. You're just being what God has called you to be.

You don't have to travel all over the world to borrow things from people. God wants to speak to you. God wants to speak to everything because each church is unique.

Each ministry is different. And let me tell you this. When, if you and your ministry superimposes another ministry upon your ministry, it squeezes out your ministry so your ministry isn't getting done.

And there's an emptiness in what God wants to do. You have to be what God called you to be. And so I got up off the carpet and I went back to my church and I was so excited just because there was just a peace now about pastoring.

And there was no longer that striving. And a few months later, I got a phone call from my father. He said, I've been listening to some of your sermon tapes.

He said, what's happened to you? You're different. There's a difference in your voice. And I said, I just kind of laid down all the plans of man.

I'm just trying to obey God. And he said, you know what? I'm starting to do these pastors conferences. Would you mind traveling with me around the world preaching to pastors? I went, would I mind? Would I mind? And I tell you what, I never dreamed about doing anything like this.

It was never an agenda of mine. And you know what I learned from that? When you start putting your own dreams down, your own desires down, your own ambitions, your own agendas, then God raises something up far above what you ever thought or imagined in your whole life. And folks, you're gonna get worn out, weary, downcast and defeated if you keep running from conference to conference, trying to support yourself and your level of encouragement by trying to implement some new kind of program in your church.

Time to forget about all that stuff right now. And just say, this day, I set my mind, I set my heart. I determined to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Hallelujah. Stand with me if you would, please. When my father introduced me yesterday, he said, there was this bishop that said, you know, we really love your sermons, but we relate to you more.

I think a lot of pastors relate to me more because I have made every mistake a pastor could possibly make. I think people relate to me because most churches are 300 or under. Most pastors are pastoring small churches like I've pastored most of my life.

And most pastors that are pastoring small churches struggle the same way that I have struggled in my past. Feeling like I need to make the church bigger. I need to do more.

And I've been to all the conferences where, you know, you sit around the table with all the guys and one guy says, you know, my church has 200. And then the next guy goes, I remember when my church was that small. We have 500.

And the next guy on the table says, oh, 500, is that all? We have a thousand. And I've been at those kind of meetings. And I know what it's like to kind of feel small sometimes or insignificant or you're not doing enough for God.

That's a lie from the pit of hell. Some of the best churches in the United States of America are churches of 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100 people. And we just need to be men and women who are faithful to God.

And God, if you call me to... And I do have a passion still to...

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