

Preached by Dr. David M. Hughes  
First Baptist Church, Winston-Salem  
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**ON THE OCCASION OF THE 150<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF FBC**  
**2 Corinthians 3:17-4:1, 7; 1 Corinthians 15:58**

During my tenure as your pastor, I had the honor of speaking at the 120<sup>th</sup> and 125<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of FBC. On most days between 1991 and 2013, I was confident we would make it to our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. But I didn't assume I'd still be around to speak on this occasion, and I appreciate the invitation very much!

So let me hasten to say, "Congratulations First on Fifth!" Thousands of churches close their doors every year in the United States, and making it to the 150-year mark is anything but guaranteed. But you have survived some stiff internal and external crises over 15 decades, and that is no small thing!

Fifty years ago, when our church was celebrating our centennial, our church historian at the time—as Mrs. Lettie G. Bowers—wrote the following: "The First Baptist Church has a glorious heritage. Development has come, sometimes with great travail, but changes have come to keep the church related to the times in which it exists."

These sentiments reflect the balancing act we are called to today—to honor and even celebrate our past, without being captive to it. As the Apostle Paul says, "The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

Of course, this freedom is not unlimited. It is to be exercised under the Lordship of Christ. But the history of the Church in general and our church in particular demonstrates that where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom is to

innovate the way we do things, not for the sake of innovation, but for the sake of reaching and ministering to others in the name of Jesus in a world that is constantly changing.

I'm guessing we would all agree that if we were doing church the same way they were doing it 150 years ago, we would be long gone. I'm guessing that if our pastoral staff were paid the salary our first pastor earned in his first year of ministry here--\$25—they would be long gone! Henry Brown, our longest-tenured pastor with 40 years of service, was famous for visiting members of FBC as he traveled in his horse and buggy from house to house. That wouldn't work today!

Did our members always welcome change? Honestly...no! David and Jake, you might be interested to know that when the first organ was installed during Dr. Brown's tenure, one man opened and read a newspaper in protest, and other members left the building when the organ was in use.

One of our most radical innovations of its day (around 1960) was constructing a Youth and Recreation building with a gymnasium and a lounge, complete with a bar, for heaven sakes! This was unheard of! Our pastor at the time, Dr. Ralph Herring, and many of our members were opposed. Our church eventually approved the building, but it took five years and eight building committees to get it through!

Today, we can affirm with Paul that for the last 150 years we have held God's treasure of the Gospel in imperfect, clay jars. None of us has been perfect, not the pastors or the members. There has been hurt and heartache here, and difficult periods of struggle.

But we have done a lot of things right. Like founding or contributing to the founding of many Baptist churches in this area and planting a church in the Dominican Republic with our friends at First Presbyterian. Like insisting that women participate in church business meetings before they had the right to vote in

our nations' elections, and ordaining women as deacons and ministers in the 1970s, and even calling a woman as pastor in 2015. Like starting countless community ministries during the tenure of Randall Lolley, and an integrated Children's Center under the leadership of Mitzi Moore. Like hosting one of the longest-running, continuous television ministries of any church in the country, largely due to the vision and influence of Egbert Davis. Like providing office space to CBFNC free of charge, and hosting our homeless friends in our gymnasium, and founding the Winston-Salem Center for Education and the Arts.

And, btw, constructing this sanctuary, which was deemed very unusual in its style and beauty in 1925, was no small thing. And to this day, it's still no small thing!

Time won't allow to mention all our innovations. But you get the point.

Now this is all well and good, but what are our prospects going forward?

Recently I was invited to make a presentation on the state of the Church at NC State University. I was already aware of the many challenges facing the church. But when I completed my preparation, I was even more astounded about the dire straits our churches find ourselves in.

To be sure, there are churches doing well these days, but they are few in number. Even before the pandemic, 75-150 Protestant churches in America were closing their doors every week. Average crowd size on a Sunday morning is one-half of what it was 20 years ago, and in those same 20 years the number of Americans describing themselves as practicing Christians has decreased by half.

What are the headwinds facing churches, including our own? Let me name a few. Outdated methodology. A growing number of unchurched young adults ("Nones"). Disputes over who gets to be a part of or lead the church. Church sex scandals. The church's involvement with politics. Disagreements re: Black Lives

Matter and Critical Race Theory, especially since the death of George Floyd. Disenchantment over the failure of the church to follow its own beliefs. The development of celebrity pastors who demand absolute loyalty and obedience. Understandings of gender that subordinate women. Conflicts about LGBTQ. And sharp disagreements about how to respond to COVID, as well as the evaporation of church-going habits of folks who grew accustomed staying in on Sunday mornings during the pandemic and may never come back.

These days I serve as a spiritual director, and a majority of my directees are pastors. Believe me when I say I regularly hear stories of heartache and pain and tremendous stress as these church leaders struggle in their churches, many to the point of leaving not only their congregations but ministry altogether.

Sometimes we forget that hardship is nothing new in church ministry. The church in Corinth that Paul was addressing was mired in all kinds of mess and conflict. The church had just started, and yet it looked like might crash and burn.

Nevertheless, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they need not lose heart. Why? Because God in his mercy invites us to join him in ministry, and God in his power can accomplish far more than we could ever hope or imagine.

With all the uncertainty in the world and the church, only a fool would predict with absolute certainty what will happen in the future. And I certainly have no crystal ball to consult about the future of our church. That said, I will risk offering my observations about what churches will do, and not do, in the future if they are to thrive.

First, the “not to do.” The worst thing any church, including ours, can do is batten down the hatches and do our best to survive. Ironically, the quickest way to die is to simply try to survive. This is no time to passive and hope for the best. It is time to be bold and vibrant and courageous in our witness and ministry.

What would that look like?

In the first place, it would mean we arrange our church in such a way that we are introducing people to Jesus in a compelling way, and then putting them on a path of being transformed into the image of Christ in every part of their lives, for the rest of their lives. Or to paraphrase Paul, we are a church where all of us are being transformed, so that the glory of God is literally shining through this church!

I was baptized when I was 7, and just a few weeks ago I turned 70. I certainly have not been a faithful follower of Jesus all that time. But I have never encountered a more compelling personality than the Jesus described in scripture, and the risen Christ I know through my experience with him. And I know of no better way to live this life than as a fully-formed follower of him, and no better ministry than to invite others on that same journey.

In the second place, it would mean cultivating a deep sense of community within our congregation. One of my regrets about my time of ministry here is that I did not emphasize community enough. I now understand, thanks to many deep experiences of community with the Transforming Center, the ministry I've worked with since 2013, that deep community is a must for going deep with Jesus. Why do people get on planes and fly hundreds or thousands of miles to join our communities, when so many Christians can't be bothered to drive a few miles to church? Because our Transforming Communities actually offer the kind of safe, transparent, life-changing community that is rare. If we find a way to do that here, people will want to be part of it.

And finally, we will be involved in our community and the world in multiple ways. We have already been involved in lots of ways. But again, if I had a do-over at FBC, I would encourage us to be involved in more justice ministries designed to change not just individuals but systems of inequality and injustice. Not just because

those are the cool ministries to do now. But because being a fully-developed disciple of Jesus calls us to these very tasks.

In 1990, our church developed a brochure that described the state of the church following a very challenging period. After reviewing the history of FBC from it's founding to the present, the brochure concludes with these words:

“First Baptist.

The past instructs, the present challenges, the future beckons.

With God's help, First Baptist is pressing onward.”

Yes, we are.

“And so, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”