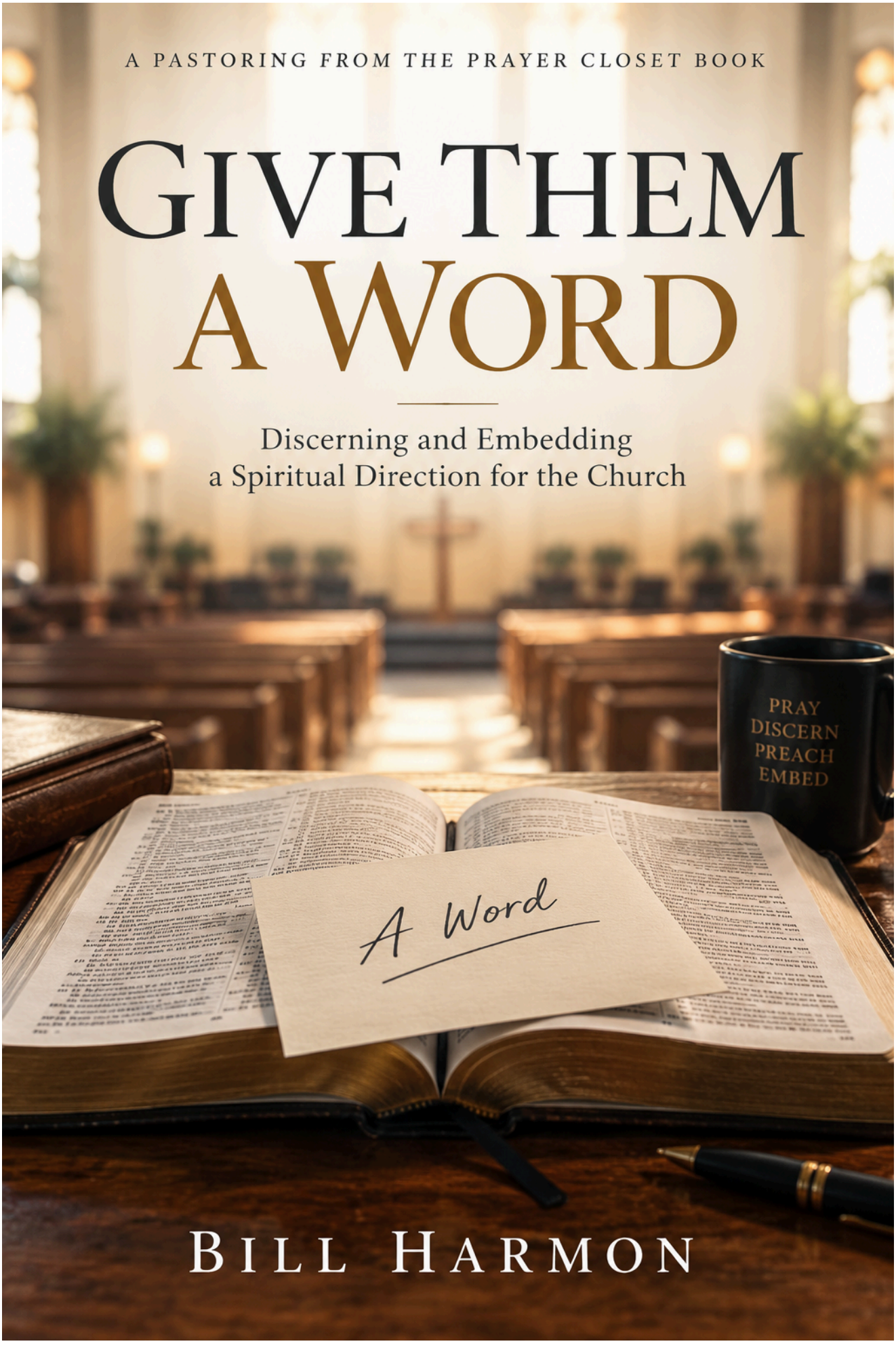
A PASTORING FROM THE PRAYER CLOSET BOOK

GIVE THEM A WORD

Discerning and Embedding
a Spiritual Direction for the Church



BILL HARMON

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A Pastoring from the Prayer Closet Book

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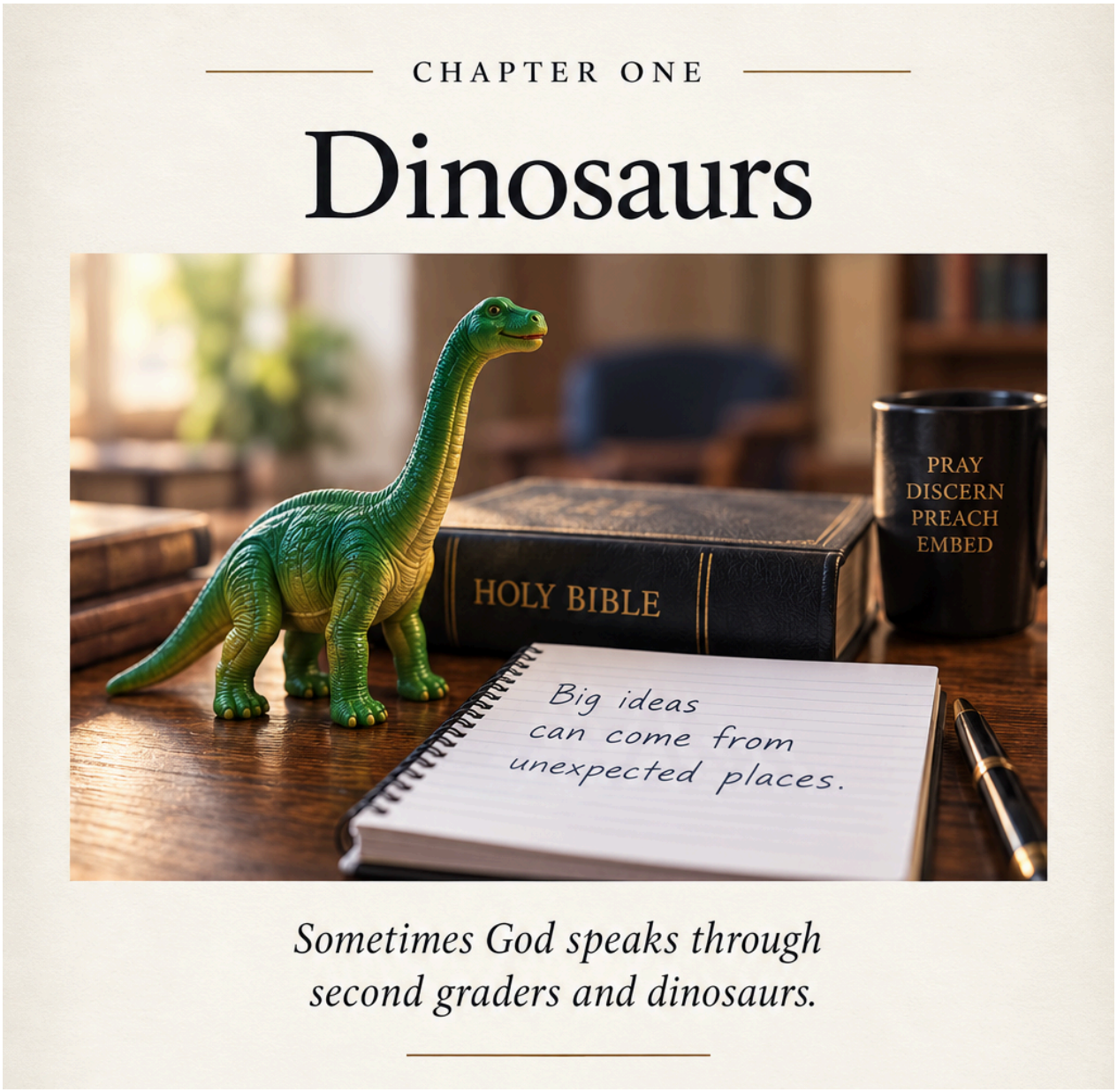
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Chapter 1: Dinosaurs

I learned one of my most valuable lessons about leading a church from a second-grade classroom.

And I wasn't even in the classroom.

In the early 1990s, I was attending seminary in Kansas City. Like a lot of seminary students, I needed a job to help pay the bills. I worked as a teller at United Missouri Bank. I would go to school in the mornings and then work the afternoon shift at the bank until six o'clock each evening.

One of the people I worked with was a young lady named Rochelle. She was also a college student and, as I remember it, was finishing her degree in elementary education.

One day Rochelle began telling me about her student teaching. I believe it was a second-grade classroom, and the classroom had a theme for the year.

Dinosaurs.

I don't remember everything she told me about that classroom, but I remember being fascinated by the concept. Dinosaurs weren't simply something the children studied for a week and then forgot. The theme was woven into their classroom experience. They read stories involving dinosaurs. Even some of their math problems revolved around dinosaurs.

The teacher had found a way to take one simple, imaginative idea and weave it throughout the children's year.

And I remember thinking:

Why couldn't we do something like that in church?

Obviously, I wasn't suggesting we spend a year preaching about dinosaurs!

But what if a church had a theme?

What if there were one idea that we kept putting before our people throughout the year? What if our sermons returned to it? What if our ministries reinforced it? What if we could give people a simple phrase or word that helped them remember where we believed God was leading us?

I didn't know it at the time, but that conversation at a bank would eventually influence the way I pastored a church for decades.

More Than a Slogan

When I became pastor of West Columbia First Church of the Nazarene, I eventually began putting the idea into practice.

Over the years our themes have been all over the map.

Hell Is Real.

Expect a Miracle.

A Year of Rest.

Accountable.

Things Have to Change.

Everyone Win One.

Dare to Dream.

The Prize.

Empowered.

Connections.

Justice.

Go.

Tables.

Gifts.

Agape.

Consumed.

Some were better than others.

Some connected immediately with our people. Others didn't.

A few that I thought were absolutely wonderful turned out to be less effective than I expected. And occasionally a simple word caught on in ways I never anticipated.

But through the years I became convinced of something:

There is tremendous power in giving a congregation a word.

I don't mean choosing a clever slogan and printing it on a banner.

I mean prayerfully discerning a spiritual direction for the congregation and then finding a simple way of expressing it that people can remember.

That's an important distinction.

The idea of using a theme may have come to me through Rochelle and her second graders. But Rochelle couldn't tell me what the theme should be for the congregation I pastored.

That word had to come from somewhere else.

Keep Your Ears Open

I wish I could give pastors a five-step process for discovering the perfect annual theme.

I can't.

God has given me these words in all kinds of places.

Sometimes an idea has come while I was praying. Other times I have been driving down the road and something has crossed my mind. I've heard a song on the radio and found myself unable to get a particular word or thought out of my head. I've been sitting at a conference or pastoral training session when something another person said suddenly resonated with me.

The setting changes.

The important thing is that **I am asking.**

Throughout the year, I try to keep my ears open to God. Long before I need the next theme, I am asking Him to show me where He wants our congregation to go.

Rarely do I get to May without having a pretty good idea of what our next word will be.

Interestingly, for me the process usually doesn't begin with a Scripture.

Normally, **the word comes first.**

Then I begin looking to Scripture to understand and ground what I believe God is saying to us.

That may not be how another pastor experiences it. I am certainly not suggesting that there is only one proper way to discern a church's spiritual emphasis. I'm simply telling you how God has usually worked with me.

And perhaps that's the first lesson I've learned about giving a church a word:

Don't wait until you need a theme to start listening for one.

If you have to announce the new theme Sunday and you begin asking God about it Thursday, you may be in trouble.

Listen all year.

Pray.

Pay attention.

Watch your people.

Listen to songs.

Attend conferences.

Read.

Drive down the road with your mind open to God.

And don't assume that because an idea came from somewhere unexpected, it couldn't have come from Him.

After all, the whole idea for this part of my pastoral philosophy began with a bank teller telling me about second graders and dinosaurs.

God has a way of doing things like that.

The Method and the Message

Looking back, I can see something I couldn't have articulated then.

Rochelle gave me the method. God would have to give me the message.

The method was simple: give people a theme memorable enough that it can become part of the way they think.

But a church isn't a second-grade classroom, and spiritual direction isn't a marketing campaign. A pastor shouldn't simply sit at his desk trying to dream up something catchy enough to put on a T-shirt.

If I am going to stand before the people God has entrusted to me and say, “This is where I believe God wants us to go this year,” I had better spend some time asking God where He wants us to go.

That's why, after all these years, giving our church an annual word isn't primarily a creative exercise for me.

It is an exercise in discernment.

The question isn't:

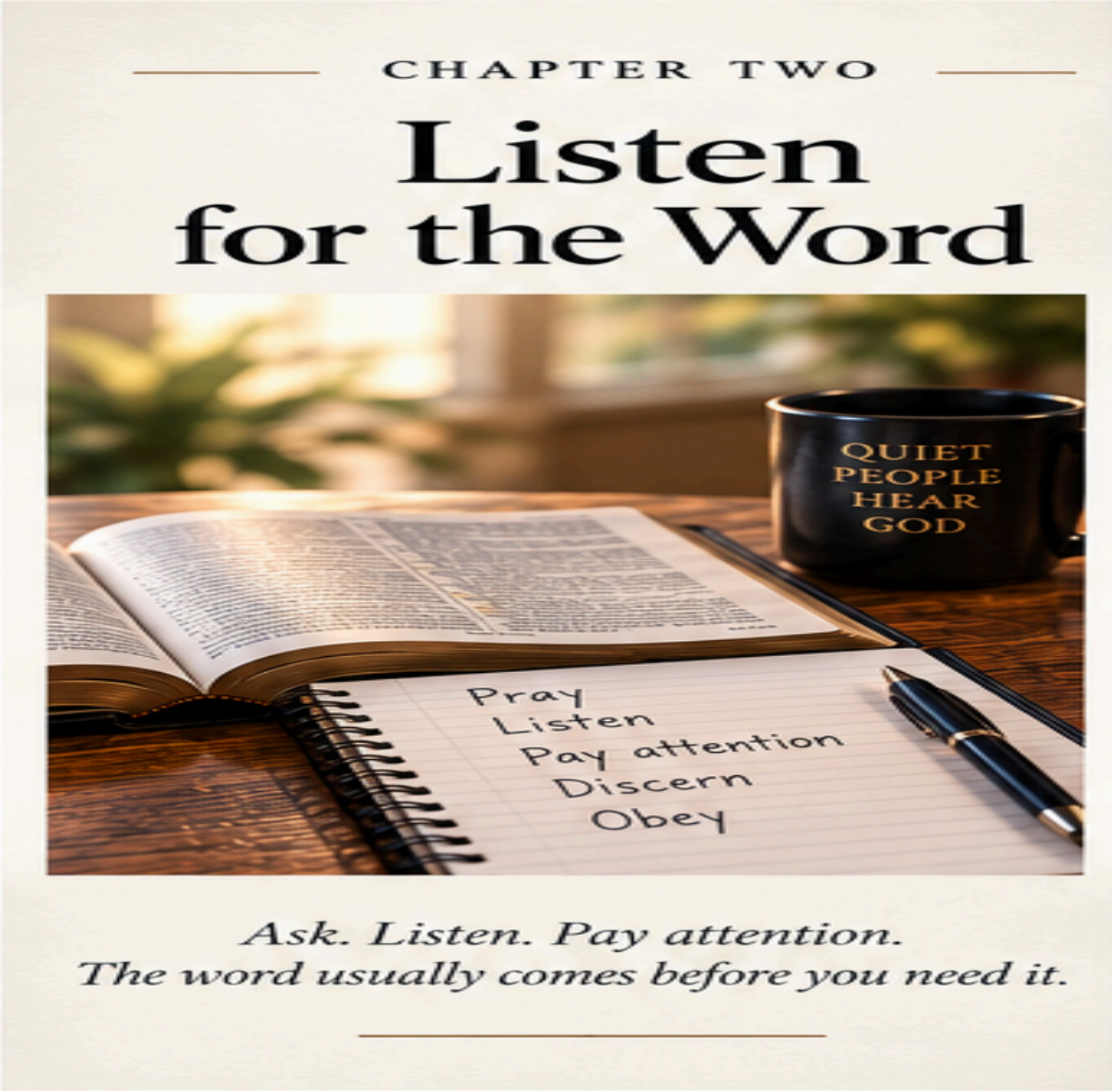
What would make a great theme?

The question is:

Lord, what do You want to do in us next?

And sometimes His answer might surprise you.

Sometimes He might even use dinosaurs.



Chapter 2: Listen for the Word

One of the easiest mistakes a pastor can make is to confuse a good idea with God's direction.

Pastors are surrounded by good ideas.

We attend conferences and come home with notebooks full of them. We read books about churches that are growing. We listen to podcasts. We talk with other pastors. We see what another church is doing and think, We could do that.

There is nothing wrong with any of that.

In fact, one of our most successful annual themes, **Tables**, was probably an idea I stole.

At least that's where it started.

I was attending a conference where they were emphasizing friendship evangelism. They encouraged us to meet people where they were and to build relationships, often around a meal.

Something about the picture of a table stayed with me.

A table is where people talk.

A table is where families gather.

A table is where friendships deepen.

A table is where strangers can become friends.

We also weren't that far removed from COVID-19, when isolation had become a way of life for many people.

The more I thought about it, the more that simple image resonated with me.

Tables.

Could that be our word?

But hearing a good idea at a conference wasn't enough.

I needed to pray about it.

And as I prayed, the idea stayed.

Eventually I became convinced that Tables wasn't simply something another speaker had said that I liked. I believed it was something God could use in our congregation.

That distinction is important.

God doesn't have to give you an original idea for it to be God's word for your church.

The goal isn't originality.

The goal is discernment.

Ask Before You Listen

Normally, I don't wait until a few weeks before our annual meeting to start thinking about next year's theme.

I'm listening all year.

More importantly, **I'm asking all year.**

“Lord, what do You want to say to our church?”

“Where do You want us to go?”

“What do we need?”

“What are You trying to do among us?”

I don't ask those questions every morning using those exact words. There isn't a formal annual-theme prayer that I recite. It is simply something that stays somewhere in the back of my mind as I pray for the church.

This is especially true when I pray through our church directory.

Several times each week I try to pray through the families God has entrusted to me. I bring their names before the Lord. I ask God to minister to them. I pray about what they're facing.

That time of prayer has become the most important pastoral work I do.

Often, my agenda for ministry comes from there.

Someone comes to mind whom I need to call.

I begin thinking about someone I should visit.

I see a person differently and wonder whether there is a place in the church where his or her gifts could be used.

I don't believe that's accidental.

I believe God leads pastors when pastors take the time to listen.

And somewhere in that ongoing conversation with God, I am also listening for the next word.

God Doesn't Always Speak in the Prayer Closet

That may sound strange coming from a pastor who believes so strongly in pastoring from the prayer closet, but some of the things God has given me in prayer didn't arrive while I was praying.

Sometimes they arrived while I was driving.

Sometimes through a song on the radio.

Sometimes at a conference.

Sometimes during a pastoral training session.

Sometimes through an idea I heard from someone else.

The prayer closet doesn't mean that God only speaks while I am sitting in a particular chair with my Bible open.

The prayer closet prepares me to hear Him when He speaks somewhere else.

If I have been asking God for direction, then I am more likely to recognize something when it crosses my path.

A word in a song suddenly catches my attention.

A speaker says something and I write it down.

An idea keeps returning while I'm driving.

Something happening in the congregation begins bothering me.

I hear a phrase and can't seem to shake it.

Could God be saying something?

I don't immediately announce a new theme.

I carry it for a while.

I pray about it.

I watch.

I listen.

And over time, some ideas disappear while another one stays.

Sometimes the Word Isn't What You Would Choose

In the spring of 2000, things were going pretty well at West Columbia First Church of the Nazarene.

I was beginning my fourth year as pastor. We had experienced steady growth. When I first arrived, finances were a serious concern. The church was struggling to make its mortgage payment each month.

By nature, I am pretty frugal. We tried to spend money only on things we believed were necessary for ministry, and our leadership appreciated that approach.

God blessed us.

In the fall of 1999, we had even built a building we called Founders Hall. It gave us space for church gatherings and a place for our teenagers.

There wasn't some great crisis demanding a dramatic theme.

But while I was praying in the spring of 2000, one thought became increasingly clear to me:

Hell is real.

That became our theme for 2000-2001.

Now, I'll admit that one wasn't difficult for me to embrace. I'm an evangelist at heart. I have always cared deeply about reaching people who don't know Jesus. If we really believe there is an eternity at stake, then evangelism cannot simply be another church program.

So the theme resonated with me personally.

But I believed it was more than something I liked.

I believed God had given it to me for our church.

That year our average attendance increased from about 125 to 134. It wasn't explosive growth, but the following year we went from approximately 134 to 165.

I wouldn't claim that putting the words **Hell Is Real** on a banner caused that growth.

God's work is much bigger than a slogan.

But I do believe the theme helped keep evangelism in front of us and may have helped prepare us for what God was doing next.

What Does the Church Need - or Where Does God Want It to Go?

For a long time, I would have said that a good annual theme needs to “scratch an itch.”

I still believe that.

A theme should be relevant. It needs to connect with something happening in the lives of the people.

But after thinking back over the themes God has given us, I realize that relevance is more complicated than simply identifying a problem and fixing it.

Sometimes the church doesn't know it has an itch yet.

When we used **A Year of Rest** in 2003-2004, I don't remember the exact moment when the theme came to me.

I wish I had a dramatic story.

I don't.

Looking back, however, I can see why we probably needed it.

I was still a relatively young pastor. I was motivated. The church had experienced significant growth. I was always thinking about reaching another person and doing another thing.

Those aren't bad desires.

But sometimes driven pastors need to remember that **this is God's church before it is ours.**

We plant.

We water.

God makes things grow.

Sometimes faithful ministry means working hard.

Sometimes faithful ministry means resting in God and remembering that the kingdom will survive while we sleep.

Perhaps A Year of Rest wasn't only God's word to the congregation.

Maybe it was God's word to their pastor too.

Don't Wait Until April

If I could give one practical piece of advice to a pastor considering an annual theme, it would be this:

Start listening before you need an answer.

Don't put “Choose next year's theme” on your April calendar and expect God to give you something clever before the May board meeting.

Ask Him now.

Then keep your ears open.

Listen while you pray.

Listen while you drive.

Listen while you read.

Listen at the conference.

Listen to the song.

Listen to your congregation.

Pay attention to what keeps returning.

And don't become so determined to find something original that you miss something God puts directly in front of you.

The important thing isn't where you hear it.

The important thing is that you have been listening.



Chapter 3: Make It Stick

God may give you a word.

That doesn't mean anybody is going to remember it.

I learned that the hard way.

One of my favorite annual themes we've ever used was **Connections**.

I thought it was perfect.

Our theme for 2017-2018 was built around the image of interstate highway signs. The possibilities seemed endless.

We wanted to **connect people to God**.

We wanted people to **stay connected to God**.

We were traveling together on a **highway to heaven**.

I could picture the graphics. I could see the road signs. I could imagine the sermons.

I loved it.

My people didn't.

I don't mean they hated it. Nobody organized a protest against Connections. Nobody stood outside the sanctuary carrying a sign that said, “Down With Connections!”

It just never really caught on.

And that taught me something I've had to learn more than once in pastoral ministry:

Sometimes the themes the pastor likes best are the least effective.

We can become emotionally attached to our ideas. We know exactly why everyone should think they're wonderful.

But sometimes they don't.

That's okay.

The purpose of an annual theme isn't to prove how creative the pastor is.

The purpose is to help make disciples.

If the people don't remember the word, it is going to have a difficult time shaping their lives.

So through the years I've learned that after discerning the word, I have another responsibility:

I have to help it stick.

Simple Is Usually Better

If you look at the themes we've used over the years, you'll notice something happened along the way.

They got shorter.

Some of our earlier themes were phrases:

Hell Is Real.

Expect a Miracle.

A Year of Rest.

Things Have to Change.

Everyone Win One.

Dare to Dream.

There was nothing wrong with those themes. Some were very effective.

But during the last several years, I've increasingly preferred one word:

Justice.

Go.

Tables.

Gifts.

Agape.

Consumed.

There is something powerful about giving people one word.

People are busy.

They have jobs to do, children to raise, doctor's appointments to remember, bills to pay and a thousand other things competing for their attention.

Most of them aren't going home Sunday afternoon and reviewing my sermon notes.

That's disappointing for a preacher to admit, but it's true.

So if I want something to remain with them beyond Sunday morning, simplicity matters.

One word can travel.

A person can remember it driving to work.

They can see it on a refrigerator.

They can mention it to someone else.

They can recognize it when it appears in a sermon six months later.

The word becomes a hook on which we can hang other spiritual truths.

Give the Word a Picture

Over the last six or seven years, I've also become much more intentional about making our themes visual.

That wasn't part of my original approach.

Like a lot of things in ministry, the practice developed over time.

Tables was a perfect example.

You can see a table.

The word represented relationships - families gathering, Christians building friendships, people inviting others into their lives.

The table became more than furniture.

It became a picture of the kind of church we wanted to be.

And unlike Connections, people grabbed onto Tables.

I began hearing the word come back to me.

That's when you know something is happening.

Put Something in Their Hands

Eventually we took the visual idea one step further.

We started giving people something.

For our **Gifts** theme, we gave them a little gift box.

For **Agape**, we gave them a heart.

For **Consumed**, we gave them a sticker depicting consuming fire with the words **Consumed by God**.

Because the sermon eventually ends.

The bulletin gets thrown away.

The PowerPoint disappears.

People leave the sanctuary.

But the object goes home with them.

Someone may see that heart lying on a dresser three months after I gave it to them.

Agape.

Maybe they remember that God has called them to love someone who is difficult to love.

Someone may see the Consumed by God sticker months later and ask:

What is consuming me right now?

That's ministry.

It may never show up on a report. I may never know it happened.

But a physical reminder gave the Holy Spirit another opportunity to bring a spiritual truth back to someone's mind.

I've learned:

Don't just give people a word they can remember. Give them something that helps them remember the word.

The Reveal

Today, our annual theme normally begins on the third Sunday of May.

That's Membership Sunday at our church.

We receive new members during the morning worship service. We celebrate what God has done during the previous church year. Then, during the sermon, I reveal the spiritual emphasis for the year ahead.

That evening we have our annual church meeting. We hear reports, conduct elections and take care of the business of the church.

So that Sunday naturally stands between two seasons.

We are looking backward and saying:

Look what God has done.

And we're looking forward and asking:

Where does God want to take us now?

On the morning of the reveal, we now distribute the physical reminder.

People are holding something in their hands and wondering:

What does this mean?

A gift box.

A heart.

A fire sticker.

Then we give meaning to the object.

The object isn't the message.

It carries the message.

Let Other Leaders Carry the Word

Something else happened during our Tables year that I believe helped the theme connect.

I wasn't carrying it alone.

That was the year Regina Martin became our associate pastor.

Regina had already served for many years as our part-time office manager and secretary. She knew our church. She knew our people. She knew me.

Then God began calling her into ministry.

I remember how she described what was happening in her life. She essentially said, “When I'm at my real job, all I can think about is doing ministry here.”

Eventually we brought her onto our pastoral staff.

Regina is especially gifted administratively. She has an ability to take an idea and help communicate it throughout the congregation.

So when we emphasized Tables, another trusted leader was carrying the word.

I think that mattered.

There is a big difference between:

“This is the pastor's theme.”

and

“This is our theme.”

The pastor may initially discern the word.

The pastor may introduce it.

The pastor may preach it.

But eventually other leaders need to carry it.

When teachers, ministry leaders, staff members and people sitting in the pew begin using the language, something has changed.

The word isn't merely coming **from** the pastor anymore.

It is moving **through** the congregation.

Memorable Isn't the Goal

There is one caution I need to add.

A memorable word isn't necessarily a good word.

Advertising agencies can create memorable slogans.

The church is trying to do something much deeper.

We're trying to make disciples.

The word is only a tool.

The graphic is only a tool.

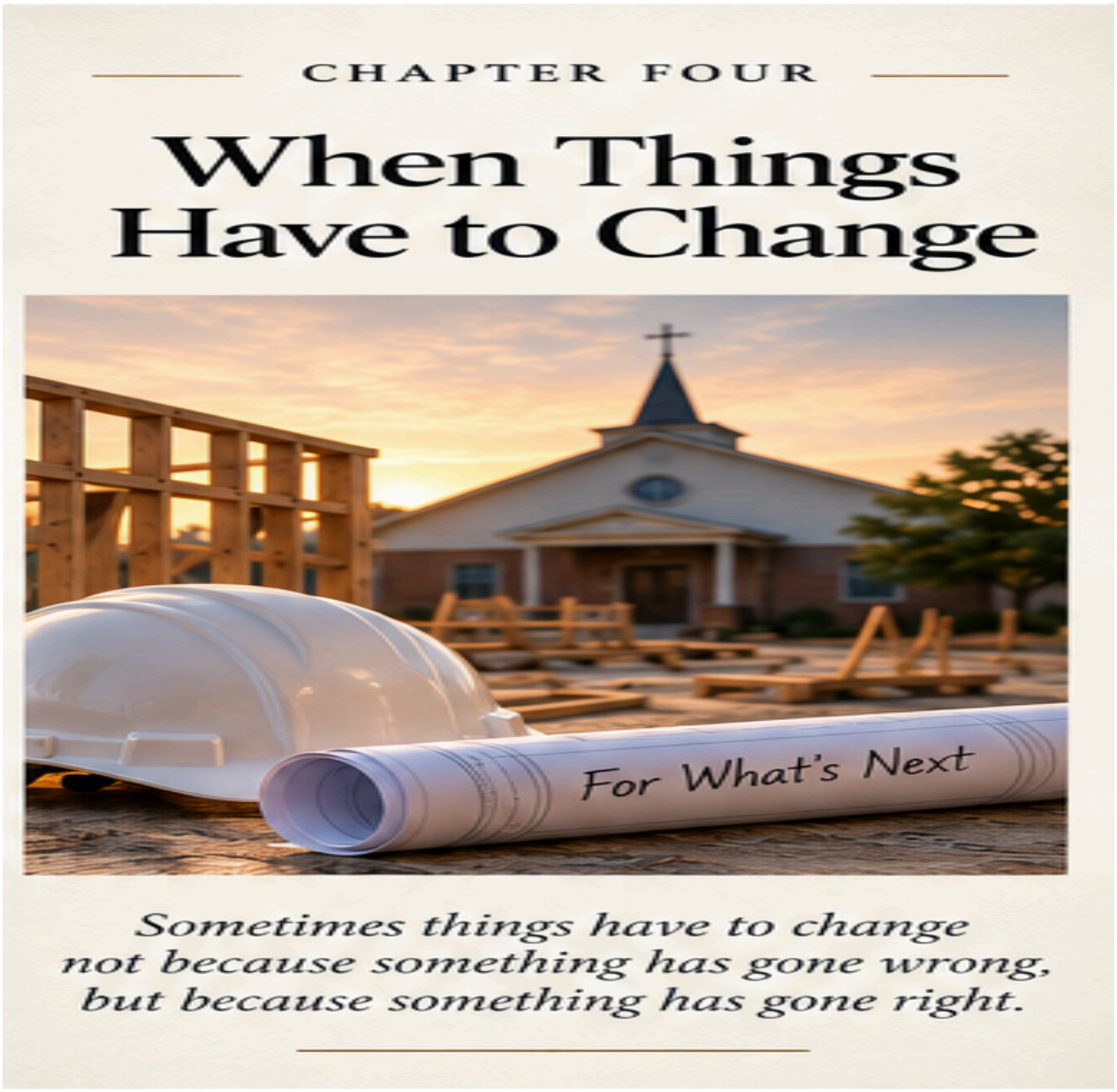
The sermon series is only a tool.

The little object we put in their hands is only a tool.

The goal is transformation.

If the word is going to stick, ultimately it has to stick somewhere deeper than their memory.

It has to find its way into their lives.



Chapter 4: When Things Have to Change

Sometimes a church needs to change because things are going badly.

And sometimes a church needs to change because things are going well.

The second kind may actually be harder.

By 2006, West Columbia First Church of the Nazarene was experiencing some of the best days in its history.

For several years, our attendance had been running in the 160s. For a church that historically had averaged just over 100 people, that was something to celebrate.

The problem was that our sanctuary only seated about 200 people.

Our parking lot was full.

Space was becoming an issue throughout the church. One of our strongest senior adult Bible classes was meeting in the sanctuary because we didn't have another good place for them.

We had a good problem.

But good problems are still problems.

We had reached the point where continuing to do what we had always done wasn't going to take us where we believed God wanted us to go.

We considered our options.

Could we go to two worship services?

That didn't seem like the right answer for us.

Should we hire additional staff?

Should we build a new sanctuary?

Or should we simply be thankful for what God had already done and settle in?

Then came our annual theme for 2006-2007:

Things Have to Change.

Looking back, I don't remember every detail of exactly when that phrase came to me or precisely where we were in the decision-making process when it did.

After nearly three decades of ministry, some stories aren't as neat in my memory as I wish they were.

And that's okay.

I'm not going to improve the story just to make the book better.

What I remember clearly is that the words fit the moment.

Things had to change.

Nothing Was Wrong

That's what made the situation so interesting.

We weren't changing because the church was dying.

We weren't changing because people were leaving.

We weren't changing because the church was broke.

In fact, God had been very good to us.

When I came to West Columbia, finances were one of our biggest concerns. Making the mortgage payment every month could be a struggle.

I am naturally pretty frugal, and during those early years we tried to be careful with every dollar. If something wasn't necessary for ministry, we usually didn't spend money on it.

Over time, the financial situation improved.

In 2004, we paid off our original mortgage eight years early.

After that, we began saving money.

For what?

We weren't completely sure.

We just knew there would eventually be something.

Looking back, I can see that **preparation sometimes precedes revelation**.

We were putting money aside before we knew exactly what God was going to ask us to do with it.

Then the ministry grew until our building itself became one of the things limiting us.

There is an important lesson in that.

Sometimes things have to change not because something has gone wrong, but because something has gone right.

Yesterday's blessing can become today's limitation.

A Word Before a Plan

When we began using **Things Have to Change**, we didn't have every answer.

Sometimes God gives you a word before He gives you a plan.

The word didn't tell us how large the sanctuary should be.

It didn't tell us exactly how to finance it.

It didn't settle every question about staffing.

It simply gave us a posture:

We cannot stay exactly where we are.

Pastoral leadership doesn't always mean standing before the congregation with every detail already worked out.

Sometimes it means saying:

“I don't know exactly what this is going to look like yet, but I believe God is telling us that we need to move.”

The word prepares people for the plan.

Church Decisions Are Rarely Simple

Eventually we committed ourselves to building a new sanctuary.

But the building wasn't the only issue.

We also owned a parsonage.

Moving away from the parsonage system and putting me on a housing allowance became part of the discussion. Selling the parsonage could free additional resources for the new sanctuary.

That decision was important to me personally as well.

My father had pastored small churches all his life.

By 2006, he and my mother were living in a single-wide trailer on property that had originally belonged to my maternal grandfather and was then owned by my uncle.

My mother had been battling liver cancer since 2000. She would pass away two years later.

Watching my parents during that season made me think about my own future.

I didn't want to pastor all my life, live in a church-owned house, and arrive at retirement without a home of my own.

So moving to a housing allowance made sense for the church.

It also made sense for my family.

I include that because I think we sometimes tell ministry stories as though every decision came through some dramatic spiritual revelation completely separated from ordinary life.

That's rarely how pastoral leadership works.

We pray.

We look at the finances.

We consider the needs of the church.

We think about our families.

We listen to wise people.

We look at opportunities.

We try to recognize what God is doing in all of it.

And then we make the best decision we can.

That doesn't make the decision less spiritual.

It makes it real.

The Right Person Opposed It

Of course, not everybody thought building a new sanctuary was a wonderful idea.

In fact, through the years I've jokingly told pastors:

“The best thing that happened to us when we were trying to build a new sanctuary was for the right person to oppose it.”

There was a woman in our congregation who could be difficult.

She was opinionated.

At times she could be rude.

I believe she meant well, and I don't want to make her the villain of the story. Her concern was legitimate.

She did not believe we should build.

She especially didn't like the idea of the church going back into debt after we had worked so hard to get out of it.

That's not an unreasonable concern.

But she was very vocal about it.

And something interesting happened.

Her opposition forced the congregation to make a choice.

Were we going to remain where we were because change was frightening?

Or were we going to trust the direction in which we believed God was leading us?

Eventually the church voted.

There was one no vote.

Everybody knew who it was.

I don't tell that story to celebrate winning a vote.

Pastoral ministry isn't about defeating your opponents.

In fact, if you pastor long enough, you'll discover that the person disagreeing with you isn't necessarily your enemy. Sometimes they see something you don't. Sometimes their questions make your plans better.

And sometimes their opposition forces everyone to decide what they really believe.

That's what happened to us.

Hesitant Faith Is Still Faith

I wouldn't describe our congregation as wildly enthusiastic about taking on a building project.

They were hesitant.

Building costs money.

Debt is frightening.

Change creates uncertainty.

But they were willing.

Sometimes that's all faith looks like.

We tend to tell church stories after the fact as though everybody marched forward singing hymns and waving banners.

That's usually not what happened.

Sometimes faith says:

"I'm nervous, Pastor, but let's do it."

Our people sacrificed.

That's what built the sanctuary.

Not the theme.

Not the pastor.

Not a clever slogan.

People gave.

People trusted.

People followed.

Our church is anything but affluent.

But we are faithful.

And I'll take faithful over affluent every day.

A Theme Cannot Do the Work

I want to be especially clear about this in a book about annual themes.

Finding the perfect word will not suddenly move a congregation forward.

A theme didn't build our sanctuary.

A theme didn't give sacrificially.

People did.

The words **Things Have to Change** simply gave us language for something God was already doing among us.

A theme cannot create spiritual momentum that doesn't exist. But the right word can give a congregation language for the work God is already doing among them.

The phrase didn't answer every question.

It reminded us why we were asking the questions.

Trust Comes Before the Theme

There's another part of this story that could easily be missed.

By the time we asked our congregation to build a new sanctuary, I had been their pastor for years.

We had walked through things together.

They had watched me handle the church's finances carefully.

They had seen the church grow.

They knew I wasn't asking them to spend money simply because I wanted a nicer building.

That mattered.

You cannot walk into a church, announce a bold annual theme, and expect a slogan to create trust.

Trust doesn't come from a theme.

Trust comes from relationships.

It comes from funerals.

Hospital rooms.

Prayer meetings.

Board meetings.

Sunday mornings.

Difficult conversations.

Showing up.

Staying.

Making mistakes and admitting them.

Celebrating together.

Grieving together.

Pastoral influence is usually built slowly.

Then there are moments when you need to spend some of that influence to help a congregation take the next step.

Sometimes the Word Prepares the Church

Looking back, I believe Things Have to Change did something important before the first brick was laid.

It prepared us.

It helped us become emotionally and spiritually open to the possibility that what had worked yesterday might need to look different tomorrow.

That's one of the things a God-given word can do.

It can prepare a congregation for something they don't completely understand yet.

It can give people a posture before there is a plan.

So when you're asking God for a word for your congregation, don't only ask:

"Lord, what's wrong with us?"

Ask:

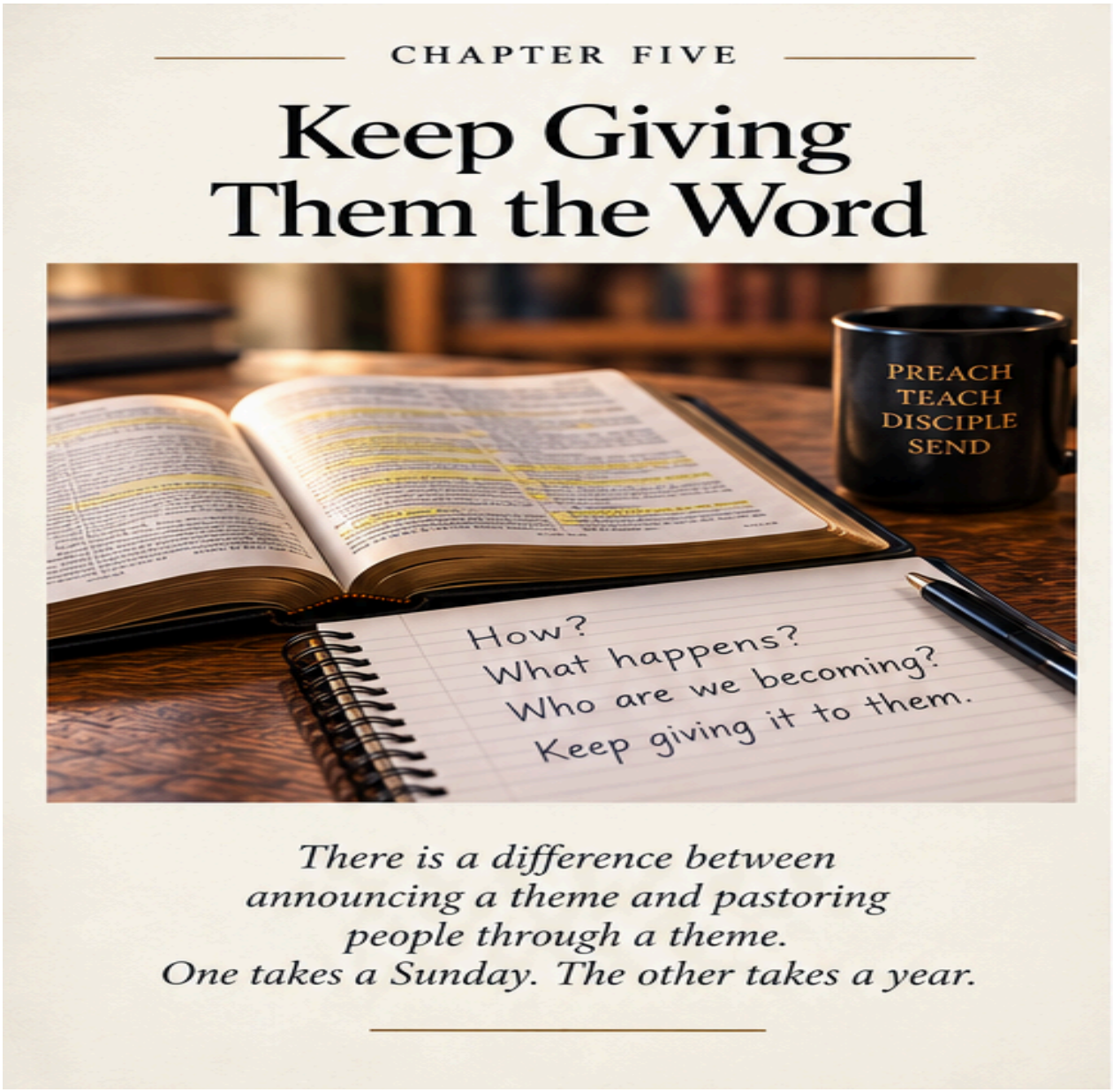
"Lord, where are You taking us?"

There may not be anything terribly wrong.

The parking lot may even be full.

And God may still whisper:

Things have to change.



Chapter 5: Keep Giving Them the Word

I used to think my job was to give the congregation a theme.

Now I believe my job is to keep giving it to them.

There is a difference.

In the early years of using annual themes, I would introduce the theme, preach a sermon about it, and perhaps come back to it one more time during the year.

Then I would move on to something else.

I had done my job.

Or at least I thought I had.

But if I really believe God has given our congregation a spiritual direction for an entire year, why would I only preach about it once?

People forget.

I forget.

Sunday comes every seven days. Life happens in between.

So I've learned something very simple:

If the word is important, keep giving it to them.

Don't Just Repeat It - Develop It

There is a danger here.

Nobody wants to hear the same sermon fifty-two times.

If every Sunday I stood up and said, “Our theme is Consumed,” eventually someone might become consumed with finding another church.

Repetition alone isn't the goal.

The goal is to keep **developing the meaning** of the word.

That's what we've tried to do with **Consumed**.

When we introduced the word, the basic idea was simple:

We want to be consumed by God.

But that statement raises questions.

What does it mean?

How does it happen?

What would a person consumed by God look like?

What else is trying to consume us?

Those questions give me somewhere to go as a preacher.

Instead of merely repeating the word, I can keep filling it with biblical meaning.

Start With How

One of the passages we used to develop Consumed was Romans 12.

Paul urges believers, in view of God's mercy, to offer themselves to God as living sacrifices.

If I want to be consumed by God, I have to begin with surrender.

We want God.

We just don't necessarily want Him to have everything.

We want God to bless our plans.

We aren't always as excited about surrendering our plans to Him.

Then Paul talks about the renewing of our minds.

So now the word grows.

If I am consumed by God, He doesn't only want my Sunday morning.

He wants my thinking.

My attitudes.

My assumptions.

My desires.

Then Paul warns us not to think too highly of ourselves.

The word grows again.

Being consumed by God should make me humble.

Surrender. Renewal. Humility.

One word is beginning to describe a life.

Then Show Them What Happens

Later we went to Acts 2 and Pentecost.

The disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit.

And something happened.

Their influence expanded.

People heard the good news in a language they could understand.

Their lives became witnesses to what God was doing.

That gave us another way of thinking about Consumed.

If I am genuinely consumed by God, it shouldn't only change **me**.

Eventually it should affect somebody around me.

I should become an influence.

Not necessarily a famous influence.

Not an internet influencer.

A kingdom influence.

So now the word had grown again:

Surrender. Renewal. Humility. Influence. Witness.

Same word.

More meaning.

Then Ask Who They Are Becoming

We eventually returned to Romans 12.

This time we concentrated on the latter part of the chapter.

Love must be sincere.

Honor one another.

Share with people in need.

Practice hospitality.

Live in harmony.

Don't be proud.

Don't repay evil for evil.

As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Now Consumed becomes very practical.

A person consumed by God should become more **loving**.

More **humble**.

More **gracious**.

That's where an annual theme either becomes discipleship or remains a slogan.

It is easy to put **Consumed by God** on a sticker.

It is harder to be gracious to someone who has been cruel to you.

It is easy to sing about surrender.

It is harder to surrender your resentment.

That's where the word has to go.

How. Effects. Character.

Looking back at those sermons, I see a progression that I didn't necessarily sit down and plan as a formula.

The first emphasis asked:

How do we become consumed by God?

Surrender.

The second asked:

What happens when we are consumed by God?

Our influence changes.

The third asked:

What kind of people do we become when we're consumed by God?

Loving.

Humble.

Gracious.

So the progression became:

How -> Effects -> Character.

I like that.

Not because every annual theme needs three sermon series following that exact pattern.

Please don't turn that into a formula.

But it illustrates the larger principle.

A theme needs room to grow.

Preach the Bible, Not the Theme

There is an important warning here.

The annual theme should never become more important than Scripture.

I don't begin with Consumed and then force every passage in the Bible to say something about being consumed.

That's backwards.

The word has to live underneath the authority of Scripture.

The Bible gives meaning to the theme. The theme doesn't give meaning to the Bible.

Not every sermon has to mention it.

Not every ministry event needs the theme stamped on it.

There is a difference between reinforcement and overkill.

I simply keep watching for the places where Scripture naturally develops the spiritual direction God has already placed before us.

The Theme Should Preach to the Pastor Too

If the word is really from God, I shouldn't spend the entire year thinking about how everybody else needs to live it.

I need it too.

If our theme is Consumed, I need to ask:

Bill, what is consuming you?

Is ministry consuming me more than God?

Is worry consuming me?

Is frustration with someone consuming me?

Is the desire for the church to grow consuming me?

Am I asking everyone else to surrender while quietly holding onto areas of my own life?

The annual word has to pastor the pastor.

Maybe that's one reason God gives us these words in the first place.

We saw that years ago with **A Year of Rest**.

Maybe the congregation needed to rest.

But looking back, I'm pretty sure their young, driven pastor needed the word too.

A pastor should never stand above the annual theme pointing down at everyone else.

We stand underneath it with our people.

This is what God is saying to us.

Keep Giving Them the Word

Today, I don't introduce our annual emphasis in May and assume my work is finished.

May is the beginning.

During the year, I keep asking:

Where does this word intersect with Scripture?

Where does it intersect with our people's lives?

What part of the word have we not explored yet?

What is God doing among us?

Do we need to hear it again?

Then, two or three times during the year, I intentionally bring the congregation back to it.

Not necessarily with the same sermon.

Not with the same outline.

Not even with the same application.

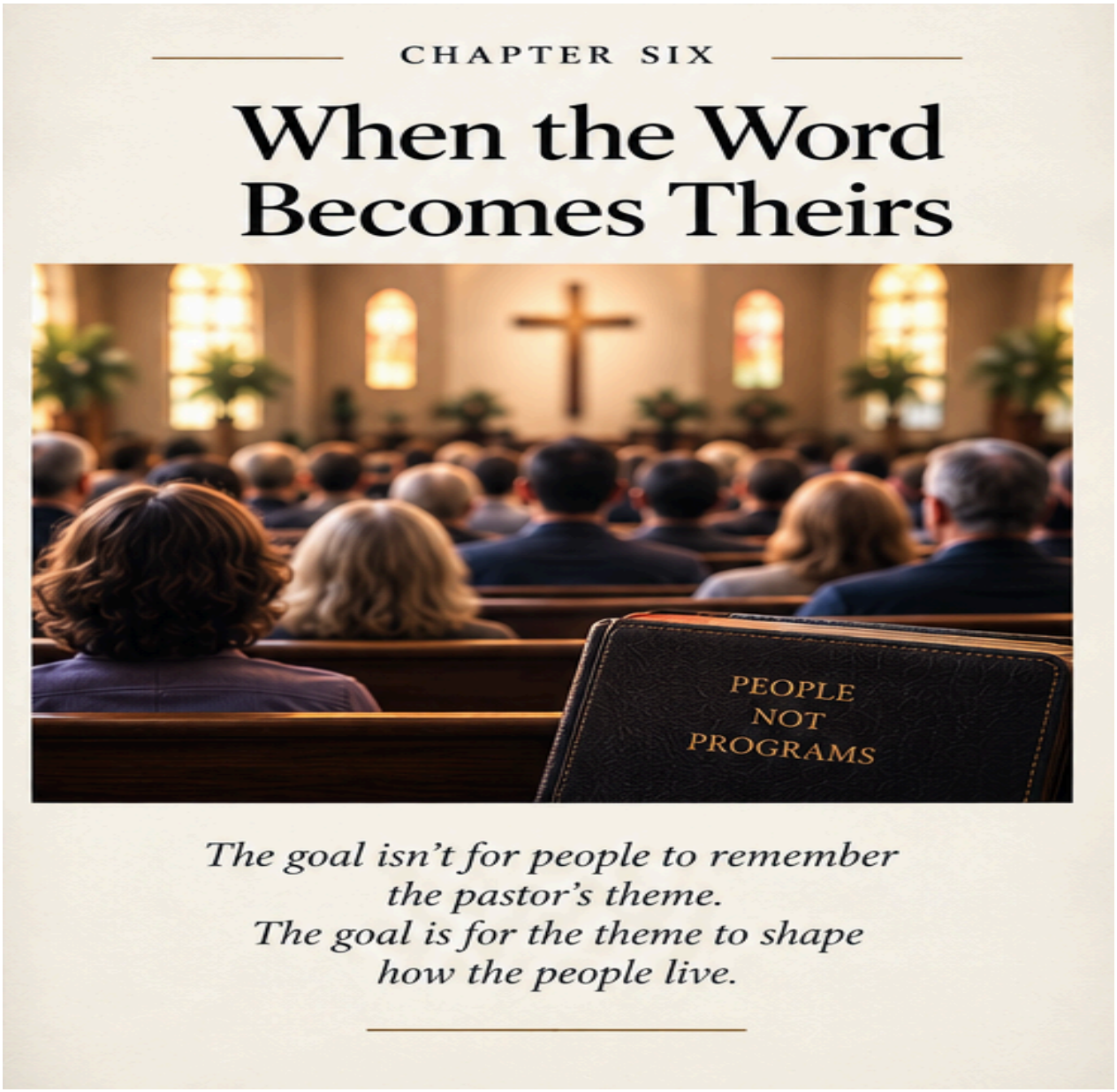
But with the same spiritual direction.

Because I have learned that there is a difference between **announcing a theme** and **pastoring people through a theme**.

One takes a Sunday.

The other takes a year.

If God cared enough to give us the word, I want to care enough to keep giving it to His people.



Chapter 6: When the Word Becomes Theirs

So how do you know if it worked?

That's a harder question than it sounds.

At the end of an annual theme, I could look at our attendance.

Did more people come to church?

I could count baptisms.

I could look at new members.

I could examine giving.

Those things matter.

I've never understood pastors who act as though numbers don't matter. Every attendance number represents a person. Every baptism represents a life. Giving allows ministry to happen.

Numbers matter.

But numbers cannot measure everything that matters.

And if the purpose of giving a congregation a word is spiritual formation, then eventually I have to ask a much more difficult question:

Did anybody become more like Jesus?

Jesus Didn't Tell Us to Make Attenders

When I think about church growth, I keep coming back to the Great Commission.

Jesus didn't simply tell us to get people saved.

He told us to **make disciples**.

Of course I want people to be saved. I have an evangelist's heart. I want people who don't know Jesus to find Him.

But salvation is the beginning of discipleship, not the end.

Jesus calls us to follow Him.

To learn from Him.

To become like Him.

To obey Him.

To help other people follow Him.

That's why discipleship is really how I want to measure growth.

A church can become larger without becoming deeper.

A congregation can have more people in the seats without having more Jesus in the people.

And I don't want to confuse those two things.

Church growth asks, "How many more people came?"

Discipleship growth asks, "Are the people who came becoming more like Jesus?"

I want both.

But if I have to decide what ultimately matters, Jesus already decided it for me.

Make disciples.

What If the Numbers Don't Change?

Suppose we arrive at the end of our Consumed year and our average attendance hasn't increased.

Suppose giving is about the same.

Suppose we haven't added a large number of new members.

Would I consider Consumed a failure?

Not necessarily.

What if during the year someone began praying who hadn't been praying?

What if a person finally surrendered an area of life he had been holding back from God?

What if someone realized that resentment had been consuming her and finally began letting it go?

What if someone who had been consumed by worry began learning to trust God?

What if one of our people treated a difficult coworker differently because Romans 12 reminded them not to repay evil for evil?

What if somebody started asking regularly:

"What is consuming me?"

And then began answering:

"I want it to be God."

How would I put a number on that?

I can't.

But that doesn't mean it doesn't count.

It may be the thing that counts most.

Some Fruit Takes Longer Than a Year

There is another problem with measuring an annual theme.

God doesn't always work according to our church calendar.

We announce a theme in May.

A year later, we announce another one.

God apparently does not feel obligated to finish His work by then.

I've seen that before.

When our theme was **Hell Is Real**, our attendance grew from around 125 to 134 during that year.

The following year, attendance grew from approximately 134 to 165.

Did Hell Is Real cause that?

I would never make that claim.

Too many things happen in the life of a church to reduce growth to one sermon series or one annual theme.

But could God have used that year to prepare us?

Absolutely.

Maybe some seeds planted during one year don't break through the ground until the next.

That's ministry.

We plant.

We water.

God gives the increase.

Sometimes pastors get to see the harvest.

Sometimes we don't.

When You Hear It Coming Back

There is one thing I have learned to listen for.

I listen for the word coming back to me.

That's what happened with **Tables**.

People used the language.

The idea moved beyond my sermon and into conversations around the church.

That encouraged me because the word was no longer something I was trying to make people remember.

They had begun carrying it themselves.

But even that isn't the ultimate goal.

I don't want somebody to remember Tables just because it was catchy.

I want someone to sit down with a lonely person.

I don't want someone to remember Agape simply because we handed out hearts.

I want them to love someone who is difficult to love.

I don't want people to remember Consumed because we gave them a fire sticker.

I want them to surrender more of themselves to God.

The goal isn't for people to remember what the pastor's theme was.

The goal is for the theme to shape how the people live.

That's when the word becomes theirs.

And Sometimes It Doesn't

Sometimes a theme simply doesn't connect.

Remember **Connections**?

I do.

I thought it was great.

The congregation apparently didn't get the memo.

It never really became theirs.

That doesn't necessarily mean I missed God.

Maybe I did.

Pastors have to leave room for that possibility.

We can pray sincerely and still misunderstand.

Or maybe God uses something in ways we never see.

I don't know.

After all these years, I am much more comfortable saying those three words:

I don't know.

I don't need to rescue every theme and explain why it was secretly successful.

Sometimes you finish the year, learn what you can, and move on.

Our responsibility is faithfulness.

God handles the results.

The Word Is a Tool

That's probably the most important thing I can say at the end of a book called Give Them a Word.

The word isn't the point.

Jesus is.

The annual theme is a tool.

The graphic is a tool.

The little object we put in someone's hand is a tool.

The sermon series is a tool.

Even the pastor is a tool.

We're trying to help people follow Jesus.

If an annual word helps us do that, wonderful.

Use it.

If another pastor has a completely different way of giving spiritual direction to a congregation, wonderful.

Use that.

I'm not suggesting that every church needs an annual theme.

I'm certainly not suggesting that every pastor needs to do ministry the way I do it.

I'm simply telling you something that has helped me pastor one congregation for a long time.

It began with dinosaurs.

A young woman named Rochelle told me how a classroom teacher had taken one theme and woven it throughout the school year.

I wondered whether something similar could work in a church.

So I tried it.

Then I kept trying it.

And over the years the practice changed.

I learned to listen for the word.

I learned that the word needed to be relevant to where God was taking us.

I learned to make it simple.

I learned to give it a picture.

I learned to put something in people's hands.

I learned not to preach it once and forget about it.

I learned to let other leaders carry it.

I learned that sometimes the theme I loved wouldn't connect with the congregation.

And most importantly, I learned that remembering the word was never really the goal.

Becoming more like Jesus was.

Give Them a Word

Maybe somewhere right now there is a pastor wondering what his or her congregation needs next.

Maybe things aren't going well.

Or maybe things are going wonderfully, and that's exactly why something needs to change.

Maybe the people need to **Rest**.

Maybe they need to **Go**.

Maybe they need to rediscover **Justice**.

Maybe they need to practice **Agape**.

Maybe God wants them **Consumed** by Him.

I don't know what your word is.

Neither does Rochelle.

That's between you and God.

So before you design the graphic, order the little giveaways, plan the sermon series or announce anything to your congregation, do the most important thing.

Pray.

Listen.

Pay attention.

Ask God:

“Lord, where do You want to take these people You have entrusted to me?”

Then keep listening.

And if God gives you a word, give it to them.

Preach it.

Picture it.

Repeat it.

Live it with them.

Let other people carry it.

And then, when the year is over, don't simply ask:

“Did they remember the word?”

Ask:

“Did the word help them become more like Jesus?”

Because if it did -

they didn't just remember the word.

The Word did something in them.

About the Author



BILL HARMON

Bill Harmon has served as pastor of West Columbia First Church of the Nazarene since 1997. For nearly three decades, he has sought to lead one local congregation through prayer, preaching, pastoral care, administration, evangelism, and the ordinary rhythms of church life.

Give Them a Word is part of his Pastoring from the Prayer Closet collection - short, practical reflections on the ministry practices and philosophies that have shaped his years as a local church pastor.

Bill and his wife, Kristi, make their home in South Carolina.