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WHAT A HEALTHY CHURCH LOOKS LIKE

It is nice to be back at Central for this period as you seek a new lead pastor. I thank the Board and also you as a congregation for your trust in me to open God's Word. I do not take that lightly or casually. I would like to share something of my heart with you in this introductory sermon. In 2 Sundays we will move into a challenging fall series.

About 18 years ago – Harriet and I were at a interview for me to become the new lead pastor at a large Baptist church – - at a Saturday morning Board meeting - tell us your ideas and strategies for church growth – I paused – replied – actually, I don't really believe in church growth – and I don't believe that we can make churches grow. Harriet later said to me – she thought to herself – Oh well, I guess we just go back to the hotel and pack our suitcases and go home.

(SHOW TITLE SLIDE) You see - Church growth is the wrong question – church health is the really important question. – Acts 2 – passage read says – The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved -- but we are responsible for church health – however we are responsible to create a culture – the soil -- an environment – the relationships that create and breathe church health into which God brings growth.

The reason for the priority of church health is very simple but critical. Why would God put new baby Christians in an environment which was toxic – where there are politics – anger – gossip – he desires his church to be a spiritual

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nursery which is clean – where there are healthy relationships – a nurturing community.

Do not misunderstand me – I believe that Central is a healthy church – but it can always be healthier.

A healthy Church consists of at least these 4 things – 4 expressions of our life together which are to be both natural and normal for us. It will be natural for us to desire and enjoy these things because God has written them into our nature and into our very being as a church. These are just headings – much more can be said and needs to be said.

(SHOW SLIDE 02)

A HEALTHY CHURCH IS DEVOTED TO WORSHIP THAT INSPIRES US TO LOVE GOD.

We are called above everything else to people who live worshipfully. Before anything else - we are called to be worshippers. We are commanded in the Shema in Deuteronomy 6 says **(SHOW SLIDE 03)** -- **Hear O Israel, the Lord is one God ... we are called to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength.**

Jesus also called this the first and the greatest commandment.

Worship is not something we have to initiate – God has always made the first move – in creation -in loving us – in sending Christ - and our worship is always how we respond to the creative loving work of God.

We don't have to make worship happen –that can be manipulation - rather we see what God has done and is doing and worship is our response.

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(SHOW SLIDE 04) Psalm 95 – the venite -

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD;
let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.

(SHOW SLIDE 05)² Let us come before him with
thanksgiving
and extol him with music and song.

There are times we are caught up in the reverence of Holy,
Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty – I love the theology of
Charles Wesley’s hymns -- or the devotion of Isaac Watts -

When I survey the wondrous cross,
on which the Prince of Glory died.

I can hardly ever sing the last lines without being deeply
moved – **love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul,
my life, my all.** I also enjoy the energy that comes from
many of the newer worship songs–

I am well aware that worship and the music has been a
source of tension in many churches. The church has always
been struggling here - We need to realize that “Silent Night”
was once called ‘vulgar mischief’– that Messiah and even
the Hallelujah Chorus were condemned as being too
repetitive.

In the 17th century - hymns were foreign to evangelical
worship and a Baptist pastor in England called Benjamin
Keach was condemned for using hymns in his service. The
first time he used hymns in worship -- 22 of his members
walked out and left his church to join the more spiritual non-
singing church. Some days you just can’t win!

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We stand in awe of creation – morning by morning in the mountains we see how the heavens declare the glory of God – we see the wonder of God in the power of creation and we say WOW! My father – terrible singer – but loved to sing How Great Thou Art!

But worship is not just what we sing – or what we do in a church service – worship encompasses all of life. It is about how we go about our day — how we live. God has implanted within us the need and the desire to worship Him and to live worshipfully. It means living with thankfulness (not complaining) – living with gratitude (not grumbling)

Jesus said that we worship God in spirit and in truth. So worship must start from the heart as it reaches towards God. It is also physical. You read the psalms and you read again and again where we are told to clap our hands – come and bow our knee – to lift up our hands and eyes to the Lord. Sometimes we may kneel – Psalm 95 invites us --

⁶ Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;
⁷ for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care.

Worship is not about what we like – or how we feel that day - worship is about who God IS! Worship is how we respond to Him.

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Best definition -- **(SHOW SLIDE 06)**

Archbishop Temple's great quote:

To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God ; to feed the mind with the truth of God; **(SHOW SLIDE 07) to purge the imagination with the beauty of God; to open the heart to the love of God; to devote the will to the purpose of God.**

Before anything else – we are called to be worshippers.

We could say so much more m- move on.

(SHOW SLIDE 08)

A HEALTHY CHURCH IS DEVOTED TO TEACHING THAT NURTURES ITS PEOPLE TOWARDS MATURITY.

The purpose of the church is clear and simple – it is transformation – to bring about change in the lives of people through God's Word. Our purpose as a church is not to make people religious – our purpose is not even to make people moral -- rather our purpose is to equip them to live like Jesus Christ seven days a week and in every situation. The primary power in this transformation is God's Word.

2 Timothy 3:16-17**(SHOW SLIDE 09)**

¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** ¹⁷ so that the servant of God^[a] may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

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Scripture does at least 4 things – they apply both individually and corporately.

1 – it teaches us truth – doctrine – R. C. Sproul “every Christian is to be a theologian!”

2 – it rebukes – it tells us where we are on the wrong path

3 – it corrects – it re-aligns our lives- gets us back on track.

4 – it equips us for life – it speaks into every situation we face –

Remember the church is to be a healthy nursery –

1Peter 2:2 **(SHOW SLIDE 11)**

² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation,

The goal of God’s Word for each of our lives is that we would grow towards maturity.

Maturity is not about how much we know – rather it is about how we take what we know and put it into practice.

You do not grow in maturity because you decided to come to church and listen to the sermon – all you have so far is information – you start to grow in maturity when you take away a truth from the message and say – I am going to start doing that – to put that into action this week in my life

You have a long history of commitment to the Scriptures in this church – I respect that and I look to continue that -- Each and every Sunday I am committed to work hard for you – But I ask that you will also be committed to listen hard and learn – to ask yourself what do I take from today that I will put into practice this week. That’s the deal!

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(SHOW SLIDE 12)

**A HEALTHY CHURCH IS DEVOTED TO NURTURING
AUTHENTIC LOVING RELATIONSHIPS.**

Someone once described the church like a bunch of porcupines on a cold night. We huddle together to get warm – only to find that we jab and poke one another – so we pull apart only to feel cold again.

Paul Tournier said – there are two things we cannot do alone – one is to be married – the other is to be a Christian. God has implanted in each of us the desire for community.

Acts 2:42 says ... they were devoted to THE FELLOWSHIP – Greek - KOINONIA.

We do not create community – whether we have coffee – pot-luck suppers or anything else – our community does not come from what we do for each other – rather the gift of fellowship has already been created for us in what Jesus Christ has done for each of us. That's what makes the church different from any other group or club you belong to. That's a spiritual cornerstone – what Jesus Christ has done for each of us on the cross. The work of the cross and the Spirit creates our community.

We are called to love one another – serve one another – bear one another's burdens- share with one another in need – to pray for one another – even admonish one another. To be honest I think some people are afraid to go there again because they were hurt in some past experience.

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Here are some relational commitments we can and must make for the sake of healthy fellowship. Let me give you some headings. They work in marriage – all kinds of relationships - What if we said at Central Baptist --

(SHOW SLIDE 13)

#1 – WE WILL ADDRESS THE PROBLEM RATHER THAN ATTACK THE PERSON

Our society has taught us that it is OK to attack leaders and politicians -- so we assume that it is OK to do the same in the church – to church board members – no its not! -- in church God has ruled that out of order.

(SHOW SLIDE 14)

#2 – WE WILL SPEAK DIRECTLY TO A PERSON RATHER THAN GOSSIP TO OTHERS.

In my pastoral experience, gossip can do more internal damage in churches than Satan does – we do his work when we gossip.

Gossip has been defined as sharing information with someone who is neither part of the problem nor part of the solution. Matthew 18:15 says – if you have an issue with someone you go and speak to them in private – that is our first responsibility – we are not free to talk to anyone else until we have done that – that also includes email. That would end most church gossip right there. In authentic fellowship we refuse to create triangles.

(SHOW SLIDE 15)

#3 WE WILL DEAL WITH THINGS WITHOUT DELAY RATHER THAN LET THEM FESTER.

(SHOW SLIDE 16)

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Ephesians 4:26 In your anger do not sin. Don't let the sun go down on your anger.

The second word for 'anger' is a stronger form of the first. It is reminding us that if we nurse anger – if we hold on to it – it grows and expands – it picks up speed.

(SHOW SLIDE 17)

#4 – WE WILL SEE TO USE WORDS THAT BUILD UP RATHER THAN WORDS THAT TEAR DOWN.

(SHOW SLIDE 18)

Ephesians 4:29

Do not let any unwholesome words come from your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs.

The fabric of the body of Christ is both strong and delicate. It can be like hardened steel before the storms of life – especially against some external threat - but it also tears so easily like fragile lace and it will be more easily torn and damaged by those who are on the inside than on the outside.

Each one of us holds a personal responsibility for the inner health and condition of this church. The way in which we think about one another – regard and talk about one another either builds up the church – or tears it down – not just when we are together but even more when we are apart.

Moment by moment - we are either building into the health of Central Baptist Church – or we are taking away from it. There are times when it may be necessary to go to

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someone – ask for forgiveness – heal a hurt – surrender our anger and let go of something that took place in the past.

The Bible does not say – forget about it – or - just get over it – it says – lay it down.

How do we get to know one another -- ? A simple idea – in next few Sundays – as you prepare for Sunday lunch – set 2 more place settings – keep lunch simple – soup and a bun – on a Sunday morning – watch for a couple of students – invite them home – or perhaps you see a single mother with a toddler or a baby – what about a senior whom you have never talked to. You see them come and go each Sunday by themselves.

I know that some of you are part of our church online. If you live in Victoria or nearby - as you feel comfortable -- I invite you to come down and join us.

(SHOW SLIDE 19)

A HEALTHY CHURCH IS DEVOTED TO ENGAGEMENT.

I used to call this evangelism – but that usually means only words. Engagement is action – it is where the church is incarnational --

Last 3 Sundays – theme has been ALL IN – last Sunday – it was **ALL IN** regarding the world. God has called us to live not for ourselves, but to extend ourselves into a broken world, welcoming all who come into our midst -- children,

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youth, married people, single people, older people, people from other cultures and circumstances

I looked at your web site. It says -- **(SHOW SLIDE 20) As we live out our faith in everyday life, we are actively involved in our neighbourhood. The trust and relationship that we have built with our downtown partners, allows us to collaborate and serve in ways that meet real needs, enhance their opportunities and share our hope.**

Then it lists 7 things you can become involved in as an expression of community engagement out of Central Baptist. I call these on-ramps – they are the roads that people need today to get them into the truth of the Gospel.

Church health comes before church growth.

We need to finish.

I have pastored churches now for 54 years – sometimes full time – sometimes I was in an interim position as I am here – it did not matter – each fall as we began a new ministry year – I stood before the congregation and made a commitment. I promise to bring you all that I am – whatever gifts I have – I cannot bring any more than that – I promise you – I promise you that I will not bring any less.

As Scott was saying 2 Sundays ago – about being all in – I am just one member – one part of the body – I promise to

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bring you all that I am – let me ask you – will you do the same?