

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
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Bridgeway Church and the Convergence of Word and Spirit 1 Timothy 1:18-19a

Most of you are probably unaware of this, but I frequently speak with people who are new to Bridgeway and I hear one of three observations. Almost all of them are somewhat surprised by what they encounter and experience here. It certainly wasn't what they expected.

First of all, there are those who have come to BW because they are desperately hungry for the truth of God's Word. They have spent considerable time in a church, or perhaps several churches, where the focus was either entirely on charismatic gifts or where Scripture was treated like a diving board or a coat peg. Let me explain.

In some cases, the Bible was read aloud by the preacher and held in high regard. It's inspiration and authority were affirmed and you knew you were in a church that wouldn't permit anything that was explicitly contrary to Scripture. But when it came down to the preaching and teaching in that church, the speaker typically used the Bible as a diving board from which to jump off into his own ideas. He would read the text and perhaps refer to it here and there during the course of his message. But no effort was made to actually explain what God was saying to us through the biblical author. The sermon eventually ended up as some version of pop psychology or relational dynamics or coping skills that sounded vaguely Christian.

Or in other cases they said the Bible was treated as something of a coat peg. It's like walking in from the outside and hanging your coat or sweater on a peg, but then going about your business with virtually no reference to it again, until the end when you are ready to conclude and you give token appreciation to how the peg functioned to keep your coat off the ground. The bottom line in both cases is that *the Bible simply didn't factor into the message as its controlling authority.*

Many of you that I've spoken with are greatly refreshed that here at Bridgeway we make it our aim that the point of every sermon is the point of whatever text we are reading. We do this because we honestly believe that God encounters us in his Word; God speaks to us in his Word; God draws near to us in his Word.

But those of you who love BW for our approach to Scripture are somewhat nervous when the music begins and you watch as people freely and joyfully express their love for Jesus Christ. You're not used to such open and unashamed expressions of delight and gratitude, *especially when those expressions become physical!* Seeing someone *actually move* when they sing is unsettling to you. And seeing someone dance is downright traumatic!

And you wonder to yourself, as you've wondered aloud to me, "How can you believe in the authority of Scripture and preach it with such detail and depth at the same time you permit and even encourage people to be free and expressive when they worship God? I've never seen those go hand in hand. And what makes it even more difficult for me is when you pray for the sick as if you really thought God might heal them and when you give room on occasion for so-called prophetic words to be given. What kind of nut-house did I walk into?"

If that weren't enough, you suddenly overhear some man or woman near you singing in some strange sound. You know they're Americans but that ain't English!

Second, there are those who come to me equally baffled by our commitment to verse-by-verse teaching of God's Word. You are the ones who've been stuck in a church that for all practical purposes reduced the Christian life to theological accuracy. Christian maturity and godliness, in such churches, is defined solely in terms of being doctrinally sound.

What drew you to Bridgeway was someone who told you that *in this church we genuinely believe in the person and power of the Holy Spirit; that we not only affirm the validity of all spiritual gifts today but we actually do what we can to facilitate their practice; that we aren't afraid of our affections and feelings but believe that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.*

Your struggle isn't that people are openly expressive in worship or that some sing in tongues or that we pray expectantly for the sick or that we are sensitive to the spontaneous prompting of the Spirit and are willing to interrupt the order of service to follow his leading. ***What eats away in your soul is that we move so effortlessly from such vibrant charismatic expressions of spiritual life into the depths of biblical truth and challenging biblical doctrines.***

I've actually had conversations with a few who say something like: "Sam, aren't you afraid that your preaching style will quench the Holy Spirit? Aren't you concerned that people will leave here with ***swelled heads and shrunken hearts***? Do you really believe you can have a vibrant and intimate relationship with the Holy Spirit at the same time you dig so deeply and intensely into the Bible?"

Many of you who've come to Bridgeway in the last 3-4 years fall into one of those two camps and you're still more than a little suspicious about this place. ***You still wonder whether or not it's possible to be so radically committed to both the principles of God's Word and the power of God's Spirit, to both head and heart, to both ideas and intimacy, to both facts and feelings, to both order and spontaneity, to both doctrine and experience.***

I said there were three observations I typically hear from new people here at Bridgeway. The third comes from that person who often approaches me with tears in their eyes and expressions of gratitude in their hearts that what they didn't think even existed actually does: namely, ***a local church that isn't afraid of the Holy Spirit or of rigorous doctrinal dialogue; a church that refuses to let one trump the other; a church that highlights the sovereignty of God in the salvation of sinners and encourages its people to earnestly desire and seek after the full range of spiritual gifts.***

None of this is meant to suggest that Bridgeway is perfect. We all know that isn't true, and sad to say, never will be. We'll be the perfect church as soon as we weed out from our midst all imperfect people. Which means we'll never be a perfect church because I'm staying!

In any case, I thought it important today to be very forthright with you about what Bridgeway is all about. Part of the reason for that is what occurred here two weeks ago when Simon Holley preached. For some of you it was like a fresh drink of water after a long journey in the desert. For others of you it was like a guided tour through the psych ward of the local hospital! I know that sounds extreme, but I assure you that more than a few of you were thinking in precisely those terms.

And some of you are wondering if this is the local church for you and your family. There are many pastors who will be less than forthright about their church for fear that such honesty will drive people away. So they portray their church in whatever descriptive categories they think the person wants to hear. That's not going to happen here. So let me be perfectly honest: No, we aren't the local church for some of you. ***If you are looking for a doctrinally orthodox church that is afraid of the supernatural, Bridgeway probably isn't for you.*** You will probably never feel comfortable here. ***Or if you are looking for a charismatic church that gives only token attention to the truths of God's Word, Bridgeway probably isn't for you.***

Let me be clear. I don't want any of you to leave. But if you are going to stay, or at least give it a shot, you need to know what you're in for. Perhaps the best way to explain this is by looking at what we say in our Welcome to Bridgeway booklet about Our Commitment to the Convergence of Word and Spirit.

Following a reference to our statement of faith in which we affirm both the authority of Scripture and the validity of all spiritual gifts today, we say this:

"You may be surprised to discover that there are a good number of Christians who say you can't believe both. If you truly embrace the authority and finality and sufficiency of Scripture, so they say, you can't believe that the Holy Spirit still bestows gifts such as prophecy and tongues and word of knowledge and discerning of spirits. If you are the kind of Christian, so they say, who enjoys digging deeply into God's Word and thinking deeply about biblical truth, you can't be open to the possibility of miracles and healing and prophetic revelation.

That is why people will often walk into Bridgeway and are shocked by what they discover. They discover that we are very serious about the written Word of God, that we teach it and preach it and live under its authority, and govern our lives, both individually and as a church body, according to its principles. The shock comes when they also discover that we are free and exuberant in worship and that we expect the Lord to speak to us prophetically and to work among us through all the spiritual gifts described in the Bible. They are shocked and wonder how it is that a church can maintain its sanity when we both preach the Bible verse-by-verse and then at the close of our services pray for the sick to be healed and for God to reveal himself to us through words of knowledge and prophecy.

Most Christians expect us eventually to move in the direction of one of these two emphases to the exclusion of the other. Given enough time, so they say, either our emphasis on the Bible will quench the Holy Spirit, or our openness to the supernatural and spiritual gifts will lure us away from God's Word into the land of sensationalism and subjectivity.

You can't be wholly and sincerely and thoroughly committed both to the Word and to the Spirit, or so they say. In response the question might be posed: What makes us think that God has given us the option of choosing one over the other? Where in God's Word does it ever suggest, much less teach, that Christians should ever think that being grounded in Scripture quenches the Spirit, or being open to the Spirit undermines the authority of the Bible?

Put simply, Bridgeway is wholly committed to the convergence of both Word and Spirit, not simply as a theological statement but as a way of life and ministry. Our aim in all that we do, whether in corporate assembly, community group gatherings, discipleship, or missional outreach, is to serve in accordance with the Word of God through the power of the Spirit of God."

Now that you know where we stand and the direction in which we're moving, let me address the one issue that potentially will cause more confusion and concern than any other: the spiritual gift of prophecy (together with the other revelatory gifts of Word of Wisdom and Word of Knowledge).

1 Timothy 1:18-19a

I firmly believe that the gift of prophecy is worth fighting for. I say that in response to those who either have grown to "despise" prophetic utterances (contra Paul's counsel in 1 Thess. 5:20) or are weary of cleaning up the mess they so often produce. If you value "upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (1 Corinthians 14:3) you can hardly afford to ignore or neglect the operation of this gift in the body of Christ.

But there is yet another reason why prophecy is worth fighting for. ***Prophecy itself is one of the most powerful and reassuring tools God has given us by which we are to wage war in a world run amok.*** A much-neglected passage in Paul's first letter to Timothy makes the point with unmistakable clarity. "This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that *by them* you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience" (1 Timothy 1:18-19a; emphasis mine).

I hardly need remind you that the Christian life is a never-ending battle, a struggle, a war with the world, flesh, and the devil. Our enemies are many and varied and committed to the destruction of our souls. The weapons of our warfare are delineated in Ephesians 6:12-18. But there is one additional implement of battle that we can ill afford to ignore: prophecy!

Paul's appeal to young Timothy resounds with ear-shattering clarity: "Timothy, please, I implore you as my spiritual son, don't even think about trying to fight Satan, the enemy of our faith, without drawing strength and encouragement and power from the prophetic words delivered to you! Never attempt to face opposition in the church apart from the reassurance that flows from those revelatory words you received. Timothy, there is strength and confidence for you in the truth and certitude of those Spirit-prompted utterances that came to you at your ordination. By all means fight. Never fear. But fight fearlessly through the power of those prophetic words!"

How do you wage a good war? How does one fight and resist the seductive allure of the passing pleasures of sin? By ***“holding faith and a good conscience.”*** Paul has in mind ***both theological and ethical integrity, both right belief and right behavior, both orthodoxy and orthopraxy, both truth in our doctrinal affirmations and purity in our lives.*** This is no easy task! We are assaulted daily by those who would undermine our confidence in God and his Word. We struggle with anxiety, with provocations to lust, with greed, with despair and doubt and the temptation to quit. With what shall we fight? What shall we bring to bear against the deceitful promises of sin? Paul is clear: It is by means of the prophecies made about you that strength to stand firm is found.

We don't know what these prophetic utterances were, but there is no shortage of possibilities. Paul may have in mind certain spiritual gifts that were promised to young Timothy, gifts on which he could rely and should now draw strength to fulfill his calling. Perhaps there were prophetic words spoken over Timothy related to ministry opportunities or open doors that would expand his influence. There may well have been simple affirmations of Timothy in terms of his identity in Christ and God's purpose for his life. I've known people who received unique prophetic promises of God's presence and protection in the face of unusual danger. In Timothy's case, perhaps someone spoke powerfully of a biblical promise, drawn from a particular biblical text, that applied directly to him. Someone may have had a vision or dream that reinforced to Timothy his fitness and giftedness for ministry which would prove especially helpful when those older than he began to question his qualifications. We could speculate further, but no need. Timothy obviously would have known what Paul meant, even if we don't.

How does one appeal to such prophetic words to wage a good war? By constantly reminding oneself of God's commitment and presence and unshakeable purpose to enable Timothy (and us) to fight doubt and anxiety and fear and despair. It is incredibly reassuring to recall tangible, empirically verifiable evidence of God's existence and power and presence communicated through a prophetic utterance.

I suspect that, perhaps long ago, many of you received words you believed were of God. But for whatever reason you've lost confidence in his promise. You've begun to wonder if it was really the Spirit who spoke. I encourage you to dig up those words, rehearse them in your mind, meditate on them, put legs under them to see if God intended all along for you to be the means by which they are fulfilled. Pray them back to God (as did David in the Psalms), and hold him to his word. But whatever you do, never attempt to fight the battles of faith apart from the strength such words provide.

Several Important Questions

Some of you have asked questions of me and other staff and Elders about some things you *thought* Simon said two weeks ago and I want to bring clarity.

(1) No, Simon was not advocating a “name-it-and-claim-it” theology and no, Bridgeway will never endorse or practice such a false approach to Christian living.

(2) No, Simon did not say that he expects the earth to be cancer-free before the Second Coming of Christ. He was referring to what will be true in the new heavens and new earth once we receive our glorified bodies.

(3) No, Simon was not asking you to applaud a false prophecy. He shared a story of how he once shared what he thought was a word of knowledge and it turned out to be inaccurate. The people in his church applauded, not because he was wrong but because he was trying to be obedient and was willing to take a risk. The applause was for his courage in overcoming the fear of failure or of looking foolish.

(4) Related to the previous point, some of you were unsettled by the possibility of an inaccurate prophetic word because you are operating on the false and unbiblical assumption that the NT spiritual gift of prophecy is the same as what we read about in the OT. It is not. False prophecy in the OT led to the death penalty. But in the NT prophecy is to be weighed or evaluated or judged, after which we are to embrace what is good and edifying and to reject what isn't. NT prophecy is always a **mixture** of infallible divine revelation and fallible or faulty human communication. Nowhere in the NT is a Christian who prophesies falsely called a “false prophet.” In the NT a “false prophet” is a non-Christian, someone who denies the incarnation and deity of Christ.

(5) I also suspect that some of you are operating on the assumption that spiritual gifts, if they are truly of God, will always be exercised perfectly. This is rarely if ever the case. Every spiritual gift is subject to error and mistake because we are fallen creatures. Every spiritual gift, whether teaching or evangelism or encouragement or faith, is always subject to flaws. Rarely will the exercise of a gift be entirely fault free.

(6) Specifically with regard to healing, some of you believe that unless everyone is healed instantaneously, perfectly, and permanently, whatever occurs isn't of God. But God can heal partially or completely, instantaneously or gradually, temporarily or permanently. Our responsibility is to pray fervently for healing and then rejoice and give thanks for whatever he does and in whatever manner or time frame in which he does it. And if he chooses to do nothing at all, we still praise him and give thanks that when Christ returns we will all be completely and eternally healed!

(7) Finally, a few of you asked if what happened when Simon was present meant that the Word of God would no longer be central and controlling in our church.

No, it means no such thing. So let's ask and answer this question: *What does it mean for the Word of God to be central and controlling in the life of the individual Christian and the local church? It means not only that you believe everything the Word teaches but also that you practice everything the Word commands.* For some of you, keeping the Word central means nothing more than explaining it accurately week in and week out. Be assured we will do that. But keeping the Word central also means *actually doing* what the Word of God teaches and commands.

Let me ask you a simple and I think obvious question: *Where is it* that we are taught about the spiritual gift of prophecy? *Where is it* that we are commanded to earnestly desire spiritual gifts, especially prophecy? *Where is it* that we are commanded not to quench the Holy Spirit by despising prophetic utterances? *Where is it* that we are commanded not to forbid speaking in tongues? *Where is it* that we are commanded to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another that we might be healed?

Is it not in the Word of God?! If you want to keep the Word of God central and controlling you have to respond appropriately to everything that Word tells you regarding spiritual gifts like prophecy. May I remind you of the obvious: it is in God's Word, 1 Timothy, that Paul teaches us about how the gift of prophecy functions in our Christian lives.

You can't keep the Word central simply by saying, "Oh, 1 Timothy 1:18 talks about prophecy. That's nice. We'll believe that. But God forbid that we should ever actually pray for the gift of prophecy and exercise it as the Word of God teaches. *Oh no. We'll declare it, but we won't do it.*" I'm sorry, my friend, but that is not keeping the Word central. That is disobedience, pure and simple.

Allow me to give you one illustration.

John Wimber, who died in 1997, led a colorful life, although it isn't my purpose here to provide a biographical history. John came to be known for many things, having been, before his conversion, an early member of the group known as the Righteous Brothers (I think John played both sax and keyboard and did a bit of drumming); as well as briefly serving on the faculty at Fuller Theological Seminary where he taught a famous course on signs, wonders, and church growth. But his fame is from his long tenure as leader of the Association of Vineyard Churches and his role as senior pastor of the Anaheim Vineyard in California.

I first met John in 1993 when he visited our church in Kansas City where I was serving on pastoral staff.

I didn't agree with John on all points of theology, and he wasn't in the least hesitant to challenge me on a few issues where he thought I had gone astray. But our friendship and mutual respect were rock solid.

I don't know if I read it in one of his books or heard him say it in a sermon (probably both), but one of the things that has stuck with me these many years was this comment: *"I would rather pray for 1,000 people, even if only one gets healed, than not to pray for any and none gets healed."* In fact, even if not even one gets healed, John would

faithfully pray for everyone. His life and ministry were not governed by results but by what he believed he was commanded to do in the Bible.

John will be remembered for many things, one of which was his unrelenting commitment to *“doin’ the stuff,”* as he often put it. As John told the story, he and Carol visited a church early in his spiritual journey, immediately after he had spent considerable time reading the gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. Following the service, John approached the pastor and asked him:

“So, when do we do the stuff?”

“The ‘stuff,’” said the pastor. “What’s the ‘stuff?’”

“You know,” John replied, “the stuff in the Bible, like healing the sick and casting out demons. The stuff!”

“Oh,” replied the pastor. “We don’t *do* the stuff. We *believe* they did it back in biblical days, but we don’t do it today.”

With a rather confused look on his face, John could only say: “And I gave up drugs for this?”

An Unavoidable Nervousness

There is something all of us need to recognize and embrace if we are going to make this work. What we are seeking to accomplish at Bridgeway runs directly counter to human nature. It is contrary to our most basic instincts and intuition to aim for a harmonious convergence of Word and Spirit. Human nature always prefers one over the other because it is easier, more comfortable, and more predictable.

Think about it. To live and serve and minister with a 100% commitment to both doctrine and experience, both head and heart, both theological accuracy and affections that are on fire for God, both freedom and order, just seems impossible. That’s what sin has done to us. It has caused a divorce in our thinking between the marriage of the two. Sin always leads us to embrace one virtue to the exclusion of the other. Sin always leads us to focus on one truth while demonizing another.

The fact is, it’s easier and more comfortable just to abandon yourself to spiritual experience without having to worry about whether or not its biblical. Or it’s easier and more comfortable and definitely more predictable to focus exclusively on theological accuracy and shut off the possibility of an encounter with the supernatural. ***But God hasn’t called us to do what is easy and comfortable and predictable. He’s called us to be biblical.***

My point is that you will probably always feel a little nervous at Bridgeway. Some of you will be nervous because of our consistent emphasis on biblical and theological accuracy. Others of you will be nervous because of our openness to the Spirit and to spontaneous expressions of spiritual gifts. It would feel easier and more comfortable and even safer if we just gave in and said:

“OK, Bridgeway is going to be a traditional evangelical Bible church that devotes all its energy to doctrine.” Or,

“Bridgeway is going to be entirely charismatic and go hard after supernatural experience and the exercise of spiritual gifts.”

Yes, it would be easier to embrace one of those two visions as a local church, but the Bible simply won’t let us do it.

Conclusion

A couple of testimonies . . .