

“Conversations with Harry Reeder and Bruce Stallings”

Part Sixteen

July 12, 2020 • Sunday Evening

This past week our executive pastor, Bruce, was exposed to someone who tested positive for the COVID 19 virus so we are taking the proper precautions as we do this via Zoom. I am so grateful to the staff who are able to help us do this. So we have some questions to get to and I'll start with my devotional thought.

One of the things I enjoy doing is giving to the congregation at the end of each Lord's Day a benediction. Technically speaking we treat a benediction as if it is a prayer, but the reality is it's not directly a prayer but a pronouncement, a blessing. We even see it from the word benediction where 'bene' means benefit, good and 'dicte' means a word so 'a good word' is literally what benediction means. So benedictions have not been so much an intercessory prayer of a pastor on behalf of his people but a pronouncement on behalf of God through the pastor to the people that comes directly from the Word of God.

Those in the church are familiar with a number of benedictions. In the early church they used to receive by the pastor going around and giving each person a benediction as he quoted a verse to them. These congregations were usually small and meeting in a house, but then the church began to grow. As churches grew to be hundreds and thousands where going to each individual was not possible, the pastor then adopted the rabbinical approach that is the Old Covenant rabbis, of just lifting his hand and facing it towards the people. When the hand is open toward the heavens it's an invocation prayer for God's presence and power. When the hand is facing the people it is a statement of God's blessing upon those as to whom the hand is directed. So it was a symbolic touch of everyone and then verse would be given.

Then came the practice of using the Old and New Testament benedictions, such as 'the Lord bless you and keep you,' 'the Lord make His face to shine upon you' and then my favorite one from the New Testament is 'the grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.' Think about that for a moment. You wouldn't be saved if the Father had not loved you to send His Son for it says in John 3:16, [16] ***For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*** So the love of God the Father and then the grace of Lord Jesus for it is Jesus who had purchased the gift of salvation by grace, then there is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is with you until you go be with the Lord or until He comes to be with you. Thus my reason for wanting to use that benediction from the New Testament.

In our congregation if our people desire to lift their hands open to receive the benediction, even as the pastor's hands are pointed towards them in the giving of the benediction they may do so. Therefore many times the eyes are open and not closed during the benediction, because it is not directly a closed-eyes prayer, but it is an open-eyed blessing of God upon His people as He has recorded it in His Word. That is my devotional thought for the day and I know we have questions that we need to get to so Bruce I will turn it over to you.

Bruce: We have a variety of questions and the first one I can relate to for it's about the mixed messages we're receiving from our leaders in our country and the frustration that goes with that. I recently had a long 3 hour meeting with someone as we were ministry planning and the next day he tested positive for COVID-19. He had gotten his test as a precaution and he was asymptomatic for he wasn't experiencing any symptoms and we pray that continues for him.

Because I was exposed to him for an extended period of time I went and was tested. Praise the Lord my was negative but I am taking the precautions quarantine they have put before us due to being exposed to it because of that incubation period. So the question has to do with the message of masks being required and then of masks not being required, that COVID-19 is highly lethal and then a little while later the message is the death rate isn't what we thought it would be, then there is the flattening of the curve yet cases are clearly increasing, so how do we process all these mixed messages and deal with the frustration these kinds of messages bring?

Harry: Being in leadership at Briarwood, under the direction of the leadership of the elders, we are called to give some direction and leadership to make the best call we can on this. We have decided to follow the directions of our Alabama State Health Director, except when specific directions on the county level overrides because of this special situation that we find ourselves in here that can occur, but by in large we have been in line with the Alabama State Health Director who has done quite a bit of research, it seems, from our national health directors and things are pretty well lined up with them. I acknowledge that there have been various messages from the World Health Organization, the Center for Disease Control and the National Health Organization but what we felt we needed to do is to pick a direction of those who are accountable, who are exhibiting thoughtfulness and caution and yet are not overreacting so we cast our lot with the Alabama State Health Director.

We recognize that there are some question as to consistency, logic, science, biological statements, doctors disagreeing with each other and because there is a lethal dynamic to this particularly to those who have underlying issues and diseases then we will err on the side of being cautious yet choosing the health director who is cautious is also thoughtful. Now down the line we may have to make a different decision based on more evaluation of how the situation changes and when we need to do that with the thoughtfulness of our elders we'll put together a task force.

In the meantime, it's not just a blind obedience. If the directives seem to be targeting our unalienable rights, our God-given freedoms such as the free practice of worship, then we'll raise the voice of objection and object to whatever degree is appropriately necessary. Right now in our state there has not been a targeting of the church and so we want to be supportive of the state at this point knowing that somewhere out there we can have a good evaluation if something like this or if this occurs again, and what would be the most effective response in that situation and what have we learned from the last time. That is my answer to the very thoughtful letters than have been sent to us.

Bruce: I know as we have tried to communicate internally and externally sometimes we feel like we're giving mixed messages. We're saying one thing and then all of a sudden it changes on us. I have to believe that they (Health Director, leaders, etc.) will do an assessment of themselves. The next question has to do with alcohol. Is tolerance of alcohol in moderation apart of historical Presbyterianism? The person goes on to say they occasionally have to defend their personal position of abstinence from alcohol as their choice.

Harry: I abstain from alcohol and I have never had to defend my position. Presbyterianism comes out of the Reformation and we don't want to add to or subtract from the Scriptures. I think a fair and appropriate reading of the Scriptures one cannot demand abstinence as the Christian response. It is a Christian response to the addictive nature of alcohol. The Bible

clearly forbids drunkenness and allows for abstinence and would only allow for moderation of anything—any food, any drink. We're not allowed to be obese with food. We're not allowed to be drunk so I can't go beyond the Scriptures in terms of the binding of the conscience.

Now I can give you my sermon on the seven reasons why I recommend abstinence and am very glad I chose abstinence years ago after I became a Christian which was one of those seven reasons. I highly encourage abstinence but I cannot demand that. The only time I find people who choose abstinence having to defend their position is if they are trying to place that upon the conscience of someone else who may have a drink in moderation periodically. So I think as long as you don't go beyond the Scripture and have a position of abstinence that is fully honored at Briarwood. In fact, it may even be the majority position at Briarwood but what we make as our Biblical position is whatever you eat or drink, you have to do so to the glory of God (I Corinthians 10:31) and that means you cannot be addicted to it and make an idol of it. You can't live to drink something and you can't live to eat something. You eat to live and drink to live because you live for Christ and everything has to be with moderation or the fruit of the Spirit's self-control. That can extend into certain areas of abstinence where you chose a way of abstinence. I am very glad that I have chosen abstinence by way of alcohol throughout my Christian life.

Bruce: I have found the key here is to have good, healthy, open communication on this which covers a multitude of issues and sins. The next question has to do with God inhabiting the praises of His people. Pastor, you have used that phrase on numerous occasions referring to Psalm 22 and they are asking, what does this phrase mean and can you provide any commentary?

Harry: I think it means what you see in the Old Testament and what is promised in the New Testament as well, which is God delights to inhabit the praises of His people. In other words, you already have the Holy Spirit within in you if you are a Christian and God dwells within His gathered church. When we gather for worship because of the preeminent task and privilege of worship for we were created to worship. We were saved to worship. We are saved to the praise of His glorious grace where in His providence He sustains us so that we have breadth to worship in, because worship is the ultimate task of every Christian—whether it is gathered worship or lifestyle worship. Lifestyle worship is what it says in Romans 12:1, *[1] I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*

In gathered worship, God takes great delight in being present with His people. We want to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth. There is no way we can worship Him in spirit and in truth without His enabling power and presence so we praise God that when we gather in the name of Christ we can invoke the presence of God because He delights to be in the midst of His people who endeavor to worship Him in spirit and in truth. That is, from the moment of the chimes until the benediction, everything that we do in that worship service is an obedient act to an expressed command of God which include receiving the tithes and offerings on the first day of the week, speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, giving attention to the public reading of the Scripture and the exhortation and preaching thereof. All of those things we do in worship have not been thought up by the church, they have been commanded by God as to what pleases Him in worship. Then we tell God we are doing what Your Word, which is truth, is telling us to do, now help us to bless You from our soul. Holy Spirit enable us to do this

in a manner pleasing to you so that we are fully engaged physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the worship of His people.

God is not only dwelling in the believer and dwelling in the church as we gather but He dwells in our worship to enable it so that the praise of God's people is ushered forward as the incense was from the Old Testament, as a soothing aroma in the nostrils of God which can only be done by God's presence and power.

Bruce: Several years ago I was meeting with a group of men and we were talking about all the elements of worship and they made a reference to the opening prayer. I quickly said to them 'we do have a prayer that is at the beginning but we don't have an opening prayer.' Finally someone said it was an invocation and so why is it an invocation and not an opening prayer? The conversation wasn't very productive at that point so I challenged them to take the following month to take notes about what they hear in that invocation and how they would describe that prayer. They began to pick out the elements and the point we were making is that each of us should be having an invocation in our times with the Lord and not just in gathered worship. It's finding those elements that we use to invoke the presence of the Lord and it made a big impact on just their quiet time.

Harry: A lot of the contemporary worship services that tend more toward entertainment instead of worship, do away with prayers because 'that's down time' as one writer said. They said they need up time in worship. I find it a very meaningful time and we not only have one prayer but we have multiple prayers. We have an invocation, a prayer of thanksgiving, a prayer of illumination, a prayer of supplication, a pastoral prayer and then a benediction which is a pronouncement at the end and a closing prayer that preceded that. We have at least six prayers every Lord's Day that all have a specific purpose as outlined in the Scripture, as well as the other elements of worship.

Bruce: The next question has to do a little bit with worship. Basically, it's a question that you have been asked before and it goes to hymns. When we sing hymns we typically sing a few verses of the hymns. I know you are a strong advocate of singing all the verses of the hymns but the question is, can you help me understand why there are so many hymns out there that people don't even realize they're missing out on singing key verses in these beautifully written hymns?

Harry: I tend to tell people that the canon of the hymn book is not closed for God is still inspiring hymns so I'm not only going to sing hymns written before the 1700s but I'm not going to quit singing good hymns that were written before then. I find it very interesting that when people are getting ready to meet the Lord (a Christian dying) and we have the opportunity to sing with them, it's always the great hymns of the faith that they ask to be sung, and not the latest, most popular contemporary piece. It is because they have weightiness, excellence and they're Biblical. There are some good ones being done now and that's why I don't use the word traditional, but I use the word classical. I think hymns that are a classic, that are Biblical and singable for a congregation are great hymns of the faith and almost all of them are Trinitarian.

I do tend to push for singing all the verses but sometimes we don't sing all the verses due to the fact that the sermon is only dealing with two of the verses of that hymn and we'll many times go to another hymn that has a few verses that apply as well. So we will sing the verses from the hymns that are focused on our theme for that Lord's Day. Our pianist does a wonderful

job of what my dad would say ‘tickle the ivories’ as he so wonderfully moves us from one hymn to the next. So our music team puts together two or three hymns, making it into a hymn focused on that subject matter we are dealing with on that Lord’s Day.

It’s not like we’re leaving out Bible, unless it’s a hymn from the Bible for hymns are not “inspired” Scripture but they are inspired by Scripture. Therefore they can be used accordingly in the liturgy of what we are focusing on, on that Lord’s Day as our theme of worship. Sometimes our theme for church worship will be from the church calendar so it could be the Advent Season, Holy Week, or Pentecost but sometimes will just be from the sermon itself, perhaps an attribute of God or something we’re focused upon and we’ll select hymns and verses out of hymns in order to emphasize that, but the vast majority of the time we sing all the verses of a hymn when we select it.

Bruce: The next question has to do with tongues. What does Briarwood believe about speaking in tongues?

Harry: We believe what the Bible believes and the Bible says that tongues was a gift that could be given by the laying on of hands of the Apostles. The Apostles had the gifts of healing, prophetic utterance, and tongues. That is being able to affirm their Apostolic gift through the giving of extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit. There are the ordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit such as love, joy, peace, the fruits of the Spirit, spiritual gifts such as teaching, administration, and mercy etc. So there are the ordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit and the extraordinary Apostolic gifts and that’s why Paul referred to his ability to heal and give the gift of tongues as an Apostolic sign. If anyone could do it then it wouldn’t be an Apostolic sign. So once the Apostolic office is done away with through the completion of Scripture then the Apostolic power and gifts to do those things have been done away with.

Now, can God still heal? Yes, but we don’t have Apostle healers anymore. We can pray for healing and God can and does heal. God can give the gift of languages and that is what the gift of tongues is. The word tongue means language for it is a language that was unknown to the speaker but known to some hearers. That is why it says in the Bible ‘do we not hear them speaking in our own language’ (Acts 2:8). It is not gibberish. The gibberish concept came from the Satanic, demonic, cultic infiltration of the church at Corinth and had to be corrected.

The gift of tongues is the Apostolic gift to give the Gospel message through a language that the speaker did not know in order that they might come to Christ. That’s why Paul says if you don’t have an interpreter (someone who knows the language) then it’s not of the Lord (I Corinthians 14:28). The interpreter was not another gibberish speaker, it means someone who knows that language and is able to interpret what was said, thereby indicating God had given this for a purpose. So that is the gift of languages. With the completion of Scripture the Apostolic extraordinary gifts were fulfilled, which included tongues, prophetic utterances and healing, so we don’t need them anymore. Paul says in I Corinthians 13:11, *[11] When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.* So we now don’t have the Apostolic gift but the Apostolic Word—the New Testament—and that’s all that we need for life and ministry. That is what the Bible teaches about these matters.

If you would like to read more on this I would encourage you to read the book by Walter J. Chantry titled The Signs of the Apostles. I think you would find this resource very helpful and

we can get it for you in our Briarwood bookstore.

Bruce: The next question is about prophetic dreams. Can you please respond to the videos by Pastor Dana Coverstone where he shares his prophetic dreams about the coming months?

Harry: I don't believe in prophetic dreams. I don't know who that pastor is and I have not listened to them, but I believe the Bible. The Bible says God has finally spoken in His Son. To say that we need another word from God is to bring, I believe, blasphemy upon Christ as Messiah, who was not only Priest and King but also Prophet. God says in Hebrews 2:2–4 that He has finally spoken in His Son and it was confirmed to us by those who heard, meaning the Apostles, with signs wonders and miracles. In other words, God has given His final Word. We have it. We don't need another Word and God is not giving another Word. That's why Jesus tells us to be careful about people claiming other words from God. We don't have other words. We have the complete truth that God wants us to have—His Word. In other words, there will never be a time when Harry Reeder will stand in a pulpit and say 'God gave me a dream for this sermon today.' I will always take you to the Bible, chapter and verse.

Now, do I believe God can give dreams to emphasize things in our life for influence and inspiration? Certainly, He can arrange all kinds of things to inspire us, to move us and to get our attention, but God is not revealing Himself. Hebrews 1:1–2 says *[1] Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, [2] but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.* God has finally spoke through His Son so we have God's Word and I'm not going to be going to videos claiming prophetic dreams from the Lord. I believe that is actually setting yourself up for Satan's influence in your life. The Bible says that Satan will influence men and women in the last days with false signs, wonders and dreams.

We have the fulfilled Word of God. We need to know the Bible and live the Bible. We don't need another Word from God.

Bruce: That's all the questions we have for this time but I did want you to comment, as we conclude, on the Christianity in America service we had on July 5, 2020. I was incredibly moved by the service, the power of it, the testimonies that were shared, seeing the men and women in their uniforms and the message you presented, and as soon as it was over my response was 'play it again.' So conclude our time with your comments on this.

Harry: I had the same experience Bruce. I have a difficult time listening to myself but I really loved the service and would like to thank the worship team, the communications team, Dave Lewis and Wesby Anderson who helped us gather some of the testimonies and all the families that sent pictures in. That time of showing the pictures as the service was streamed online was designed to take the place of when we play the hymns of the various military branches and at a normal service those men and women would stand when the military branch hymn was played. When we are allowed to go back to having a service to have them stand I still would like for people to send in pictures of those who cannot be there who served in the military and perhaps we can do both at this service in the future. I am also grateful for the testimonies that the men shared who were being interviewed. I was particularly moved by Wesby Anderson who is currently on our staff as a pastoral intern preparing for ministry, likely going back into the chaplaincy to minister to men and women in the service. It was just a great blessing and I was

overwhelmed by it. I am thankful for it and I would like to encourage people to go watch it online at briarwood.org/cia. It would be a good outreach tool that could be used with people who have served as veterans so it would be a good idea to send this to them to let them see it and then take the opportunity to talk with them about it.

The guys who were younger I could recognize the branch of service they were from as soon as their picture came up but from some of the older pictures who served during WWII and the Korean conflict I had to look much closer to recognize which branch they were from so I was still able to recognize all of them, except for one. I actually went back over it but still couldn't recognize the branch of service. I still believe Crawford Nevins got a stand-in for him for it was hard for me to tell it was him but he sure was a man's man who stood up in that picture. I don't think I would have wanted to cross paths with him if I had been in that Korean conflict. All of those pictures were so very impressive to see and I thank all of them for out of the flower of their youth to give that time, some in harm's way and some in peace time to keep us from harm's way, we are so grateful for all of them. As the Scripture says acting like men and women ready to serve faithfully is what these people are doing and have done. Thank you.

Bruce: That's all we have time for in this Q & A but I want to encourage you to continue to send your questions to askthepastor@briarwood.org and we'll look forward to answering them in our future Q & A time.