

“SIGNPOSTS ALONG THE ROAD”

Various Scriptures

THEME: Final message at First Free. Main themes during 15 years. (Church File)

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The first Sunday that Dr. Ivan York preached here Liz and I we were visiting one of my sisters and her husband at their home in Brockville on the St. Lawrence Seaway in Canada. We decided to come back through New York State. I didn't want to take any wrong turns so I had to watch the highway signs closely.

I learned my lesson many years ago. I was traveling at night I turned off to get gas. Then I took the wrong on-ramp back to the highway. I was cruising along quite merrily for about a half hour on the right highway, but going in the wrong direction.

- What possible relevance could this have for you? Well, we've been traveling together—many of us for 15 years. It has been my duty to make sure we stay the course—that we keep moving in the right direction.

I decided that the best way to conclude my pastoral service here is to review some of the main themes of my ministry over the years.

- What I plan to say this morning is not a pile of pleasant parting platitudes. I don't want to waste your time, or mine.

I hope you'll get a transcript at the Information Desk in the Lobby and review this in the months ahead to stay on track.

I want to leave you with five **signs** to watch for to as you move on in the way of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our Lord Jesus Christ said he is the Way—the only way to God the Father (John 14:6). Stay the course.

We are all prone to wander. The Bible says we all have strayed and turned to our own way (Isaiah 53:6).

The natural condition of people is to be spiritually lost.

There's practically no end to the number of twists and turns in life that can spin you away from following our Lord Jesus Christ.

We're traveling through enemy territory. The Apostle John wrote, *'We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.'* (1 John 5:19) How many times have you heard me quote that verse these past 15 years?

[1st sign to help you stay on course]

I. PRIORITY OF SCRIPTURE

This is the main thing. You've heard me cite Lee Iacocca's famous comment about quality at Chrysler.

'The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.' (Lee Iacocca). That statement is much too good for any business enterprise. I think it belongs with the church.

- Nothing in the universe is more important than the will of God. And God Almighty has revealed to us his will with incomparable clarity and specificity in his inspired and inerrant word that we call Holy Scripture, or the Bible. That is the main thing for us.

The Psalmist tells us how practical God's word is: *'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.'* (Psalm 119:105). We live in this kingdom of darkness that is under the control of the evil one—the devil.

That's why God's word is indispensable. It keeps us on course in a dark, spiritually hostile world.

- God's word is powerful. That's how God gets through to us. The New Testament writer to the Hebrews said, *'For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.'* (Hebrews 4:12)

It's the power of the word of God that makes you realize that you need God.

It's the power of the word of God that brings people into a life changing relationship with God.

When the Apostle Paul spoke about the gospel he meant the message of hope and forgiveness and eternal life that is revealed in the word of God. He told the Roman church, *'I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.'* (Romans 1:16)

- This is where I stick my nose in. Some time next year you may have a candidate to serve as your new preaching pastor. Make certain he is a man of the word. He must love the word and be visibly energized by preaching and teaching the word of God to you. He must be a capable student of the word of God. Make sure

he spends more time in prayerful preparation for preaching and teaching God’s word than in any other aspect of his pastoral duty.

There are lots of charming and clever preachers in America that can help people limp through another week and keep them coming back week after week. But do they help them to grow strong and stand firm in Christ? That’s what you need here at First Free. Please don’t settle for anything less.

[2nd sign to keep you on course]

II. AUTHENTICITY OF MEMBERSHIP

Eighteen years ago Randal Balmer wrote about the state of Evangelicalism in America. He is the son of a Free Church pastor, Clarence Balmer, now deceased, who served as pastor in Freeport, Illinois. The last I heard, Randal was a Professor of history at Columbia University on Manhattan, New York. Dr. Balmer warned that there are many people in evangelical churches who have been socialized into the Christian religion.

You’ve heard me echo this warning many times over my 15 years here. There are people in churches who think they are Christians, but they merely learned as little children what ‘godly’ behavior looks like, and they learned how to act. Little Jimmy raised his hand when the Sunday School teacher asked who wanted to ask Jesus into their hearts, so because Jimmy did it little Johnny and Sally did too. Mom and Dad rejoiced and told everyone that their little boy or girl had become a Christian. Sometimes it was true; often it wasn’t. And the child grew up not knowing any better. It was all just a matter of behavior. There was never any understanding of God’s mercy and grace.

Balmer observed that for a child raised in such a household where he already adheres to most of the standards of ‘godly’ behavior, it is difficult to grasp the significance of true faith in Jesus Christ because it demands no alteration of behavior. (Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*. Oxford University Press, 1989. pp. 106-07)

- We don’t know with absolute certainty who is and who is not an authentic Christian.

Jesus told a parable in Matthew 13 about the kingdom of heaven. He used an illustration of wheat and weeds growing together in a field. He said you can’t go out there and pull out the weeds because you might make a mistake and destroy good wheat. You have to wait until the harvest when the separation will be made.

For us this means that at the judgment God will make the separation.

But it is our responsibility to make it perfectly clear that it takes more than learning the right behavior to be a Christian. It takes genuine repentance of sins, sincere personal faith in Jesus Christ alone as your Savior, and willing submission to him as your Lord.

- The Apostle Paul didn’t pull any punches when dealing with this in his letter to an unhealthy church: *‘Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you-- unless, of course, you fail the test?’* (2 Corinthians 13:5)

Jesus Christ our Lord emphasized this same danger. He said, *‘Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.’* (Matthew 7:21)

He said many will object, citing all the things they have done in his name. That’s Nominalism. There are nominal Christians in nominal churches. They claim the name, but there’s no reality to it. Jesus said, *Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’* (Matthew 7:23)

According to Jesus Christ there are people traveling with you on this way to eternal life, but in the end they won’t make it through immigration.

- Please be vigilant. Be wise. Ask God to give you discernment.

The Apostle Paul warned the elders from the church at Ephesus, *‘I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!’* (Acts 20:29-31)

You may be thinking, ‘John, this is not the kind of thing to talk about on your final Sunday with us.’ Paul did it, and so must I. Otherwise I have no business calling myself a pastor.

I’m convinced that all authentic followers of Jesus Christ will appreciate any opportunity to affirm the genuineness of their faith in Christ.

- I love authentic Christians and I love the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. It’s worth fighting for and worth dying for. I am willing to do that.

Keep watch for this crucial sign of the road First Free takes from here on. Just being present and keeping busy in the name of Jesus Christ has never made anyone an authentic Christian.

[3rd sign to help you stay the course]

III. VITALITY OF THE CHURCH

Here’s a refrain you’ve heard from me over and over unless you’ve been in a coma. *The church is primarily a living spiritual organism and only secondarily a man-made organization. The organization exists to serve the organism, not the other way round.*

The church is the living body of which Jesus Christ our Lord is the Head.

Few things are more important in the life of a church than ensuring that it focuses more on its spiritual life than on organizational matters.

A fixation on organizational details can destroy spiritual vitality.

The saintly British pastor Alan Redpath served for 9 years as pastor of one of the most famous churches here in the Midwest. This was about 50 years ago. The man who was my spiritual mentor when I was a pastor in California served as Redpath’s associate pastor those years. It was evidently a time when the key leadership of the church had become bogged down in organizational administrivia. One evening, after a particularly unpleasant council meeting of the church, my friend—I’ll call him Frank, because that is his name—was passing Redpath’s office. Redpath called out to him. Frank found Dr. Redpath with his face in his hands, bowed over the desk, weeping. He asked, “Frank, can you give me one good reason why I should believe that any of those men know my Lord Jesus Christ?”

- Read the words of our Lord to the seven churches in Revelation 2&3. Those Asian churches were 40-45 years old, and some of them were losing their spiritual vitality. Some had lost it all.

To the church at Ephesus our Lord said, *‘Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.’* (Revelation 2:4-5)

To the church at Laodicea he said, *‘I know your deeds, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.’* (Revelation 3:15-16)

- Almost three months ago in a sermon on John 15 I asked you to consider how much of your Christian life is defined by doing things. Are there things you do faithfully in some area of the church’s program, but they leave you feeling empty and unfulfilled?

Of course God wants you to serve others and to do good things, but not as a substitute for dealing with the kind of person he wants you to be.

The church as a living spiritual organism will not be healthy if you turn all your attention to doing things. A busy church with a lot of programs is not necessary a healthy church. It may just be a highly organized church.

- Please don’t misunderstand me on this. Organization is essential.

The early church in Jerusalem grew rapidly and was desperately in need of a good organizational structure.

Important matters were being overlooked and people were being hurt. They had to organize for the health of the church

This is what they did: ‘So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”’ (Acts 6:2-4)

You see what happened in the first church in Jerusalem. They realized that a good organizational structure was necessary, but the church as a spiritual organism was infinitely more important.

- If First Free Church is going to be healthy in staying the course, you must focus much, much more of your attention on being who God has called you to be than on doing a lot of activities. What you do should be an expression of who you are.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the troubled Galatian church, *‘I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you. . . My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.’* (Galatians 4:11, 19)

Spiritual formation is what matters most. Church members must grow more and more into the likeness of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is the key to a church’s vitality.

[4th sign to keep you on course]

IV. ACCOUNTABILITY OF LEADERSHIP

I only want to talk about pastoral leadership here.

Please, please, do not minimize the significance of a pastoral call.

I have served on the Search Committee for each of the associate pastors who has come to this church in the past 15 years. In every case we wanted to hear how and when they were called by God to be pastors.

When the Search Committee and this congregation grilled me more than 15 years ago, you wanted to know about my call to the ministry. I loved the question, because I know without a doubt that God called me to be a pastor. I tried to resist that call when I was in my late teens, and God drew me back so compellingly that I never again doubted it.

Make sure that your next senior pastor has that kind of conviction.

- He must speak lovingly to God’s precious people, but not be afraid to speak boldly, if God’s Spirit moves him to do so.

I apologize to any of you I may have offended by any remarks I have made. I cannot recall ever intending to be malicious to anyone. But please understand that I cannot apologize if the word of God that I have preached has offended you. You have to take that up with the Author.

- Because God calls the pastor, he is accountable first and foremost to God. He is called to lead and care for God’s church.

But the pastor is a fallible man. He must be held accountable by a group of godly people, usually the elders. Their primary duty is to hold the pastor accountable to God.

They must have the courage to confront him if he ever starts to play politics in the church, if he caters to a certain group of people, if he tries to be a dictator, or if he ever compromises his commitment to preach only the truth of God’s word.

A congregation can have confidence in following the spiritual leadership of their pastor if he is held accountable in this way.

[5th sign to keep you on course]

V. INTIMACY WITH GOD

God created you in his image and for himself. You exist to please God.

You cannot please God if your life is wrapped up in your plans and your pleasures. Sadly, that is the normal way of life in a fallen world under the control of the evil one.

If the desire of your heart is to maintain intimacy with God you will please God.

- I’ve told you many times how I give attention to this. It all revolves around the Lord’s Prayer.

I’m not saying this is the only way, but it works well for me.

I think I can promise you that if you set aside a time and a place each day where you can kneel and pray the Lord’s prayer privately, slowly, deliberately, and contemplatively, you will know that the Lord is near to you. He will give you his peace, no matter what’s whirling around about you.

You will be able to say with the Psalmist Asaph, ‘*But as for me, the nearness of God is my good.*’ (Psalm 73:28 NASB)

- Let me give you an example of how this prayer works for me. Yesterday as I prayed, *Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done*, I pondered how important it is to long for God’s kingdom in a world that is under control of the evil one—a world where God’s will is not being done. I realized that it is only in God’s kingdom that his will is done.

By faith in Jesus Christ God rescued me from the dominion of darkness and brought me into the kingdom of his Son (Colossians 1:13). That means God’s will can be done in my life, and that’s what he’s looking for. That’s why I ask my Father in heaven for daily bread. It’s not rye bread or whole wheat; it’s what I need for that day to live for God, and I can only receive it from God. It means I can’t get by one day without depending on God.

Every day God’s Spirit gives me fresh insights and encouragement—more than I could ever have imagined.

- You may have a different way of maintaining intimacy with God. If you don’t, try my way, because more than anything else you need to be close to God to say the course.

There’s so much more I could say. But after 15 years, that’s enough. Thank you for being family to Liz and me. I’m most concerned about helping you look ahead, and I humbly ask you to keep these themes in view as you move ahead as a church.

They deserve your constant attention: Priority of Scripture; Authenticity of Membership; Vitality of the Church; Accountability of Leadership; and Intimacy with God.