

## Introduction

I miss being up here. Three weeks ago, Mick Stockwell, missionary to Europe who served at this church, spoke. Then two weeks ago, I was out of town seeing family for Christmas and Pastor Jacob spoke, and then last week, Pastor Dwight. You guys may not know this about me, but I like what I do for a living, so it's really hard for me to be here, seeing other people preach. I'm like, "Yeah, you did a great job. Now get out of the way." (Laughter) I don't know why that is. Today is actually a little bit different. I'm actually not preaching today, as far as a typical sermon. We're going to talk about where we're headed together as a church. It's Vision Sunday; we do this a couple of times a year. If you're a guest with us today, we're so glad that you're here. It's a little different than what we normally do, but you're going to hear where the Lord is leading us and taking us in the first part of 2014. So, welcome; we're glad that you're here today.

You know, 2013 was a pretty great year. I don't know if you guys know this, but next week will be one year that I've been pastor here at HNW. (Clapping) I'm excited about that. So I'd like to make a deal with you. Would it be okay, since next week is a year, could I stop being the new Pastor now? (Laughter) If it's alright... everybody keeps saying, "This is the new Pastor." Is that okay? If you'll stop calling me the new Pastor, then I'll stop saying ugly things about you behind your back, whenever you do that. (Laughter) I'm just kidding; I wouldn't do that. No, 2013 was a great year. We saw neat things happen. Over a hundred people came to Christ at Houston Northwest in 2013. Isn't that amazing? (Clapping) Yeah, it's awesome; "Thank you, Lord." (Clapping) And 90 of those were baptized here in 2013. That's incredible as well. (Clapping) I am just thankful for what God has done. You know another thing that happened this last year? We had a family in our church, the Pearsons... Mark and April Pearson. They felt a call from the Lord to go and to serve the Native American population in Montana. They are church planting in Montana. We had cast this vision to plant churches. We thought it would take us several years before we'd ever send out our first church planter. And these guys just stood up and said, "We feel like God is calling us to plant a church in Montana." And so they are there; sort of spur of the moment. I don't know if you were here the Sunday that we did this. We said, "These guys... we think it's going to take them about \$60,000 to make it there a year in Montana. So we were just going to pass the baskets and see what God does." Did you guys know that you raised \$80,000 for that family? (Clapping) Thank you for that. That was just awesome. We're hearing great things from them, and God is doing neat things with Mark and April and their family. By the way, you may not know this, but once they got there, they got pregnant with twins. Yeah, by the way, I think that will be child number seven and eight for them, so exciting times. They have their own church already... I mean it's great there in Montana. (Laughter)

Also, another cool thing that happened this year. We had our offering for International Missions for Lottie Moon. Lottie Moon was a missionary to China, and our church has an offering named after her that we give to International Missions. We said, "It would be great if we could give \$65,000 for that." I think, the last that I heard, that we are going to be giving about \$70,000 to that. So thank you for your generosity in that as well. I don't know about you but I think my favorite thing from 2013 was we just jumped out there and said, "Let's throw all these neighborhood block parties." Did any of you either attend or help throw a block party in your neighborhood? Yes; several of you did. They were just incredible. I just loved watching the Lord use that. The number of people that heard the Gospel or neighbors that were met or and prayed for. It was just an incredible year of ministry, and it culminated in two big days: Easter Sunday and Christmas Eve. I just want you guys to know that at both Easter and Christmas Eve people responded in faith to the Gospel, and that's because of your faithfulness in serving and sharing. So thank you for that as well. God did great stuff in 2013.

Over the Christmas break I was kind of spending some time thinking, "Okay, Lord... 2013 was awesome. What are we going to do to top it in 2014?" I got a piece of paper, and I started writing out all these ideas. A lot of you already know, next week I'm starting a new sermon series through the Book of Galatians. It's called "Freedom Story" and we'll talk about that a little more in a second. I said, "Lord, what do You want us to do? How do You want us to really move forward?" As I was reading in Galatians 1:6, I saw something that really changed me. I want to tell you about it.

### **Gospel. Go. Grow.**

So, at my very first staff meeting a year ago with our church, I came in and I sat down with the pastors and said, "What's the purpose of Houston Northwest?" ... to a man and woman in the room, and everybody said, "Make disciples." And so we said, "Yeah; I agree with that too." That was what the Lord had laid on my heart. So we wrote, "Make disciples." And then we began a conversation about how were we going to make disciples as a church... disciples of Jesus Christ. And we had this three-word formula that we're using and we're printing on things. This is sort of our philosophy of ministry. If people ask you, "Well, what do you do at your church?" This is it; it's three words: Gospel. Grow. Go. Those are the three things that we try to do. We proclaim the Gospel, we Grow in the Gospel, and then we Go with the Gospel. So we wrote that down. That was what we focused on in 2013 just over and over and over. It was powerful. If you remember, when we started 2013 and we preached through a three-part series on what is the Gospel. One week on the Incarnation, one week on the Crucifixion, and one week on the Resurrection out of 1 Corinthians 15. As I was starting to think about this year, and I was writing down all these great ideas... "Oh, we could do this... and we could do this. What if we did this..." I came across Galatians 1:6, because that's the series I will be kicking off next week. I mean, just right there at the start of the passage, this is what I read: *"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel."* God used that to convict me, and I just feel like I need to confess that and to share that with you. I realized that as I was moving from 2013 to 2014 I was starting to think, "Alright. What are the really cool, creative things that we can do as a church?" And do you know what I wasn't doing was realizing that everything that fueled what God did... we had an incredible year. Do you know why we had an incredible year? Because it was God-centered, God-saturated, and it all flowed from His Gospel. It wasn't a ministry of cleverness. It wasn't a ministry of creativity... not that creativity is bad; not that being clever is bad. But I think that the moment that we begin to believe that we can manufacture God's work in this place is the second that God takes His hand off of it. So, do you know what we are going to do in 2014? We are going to do the same thing that we did in 2013, only a little bit better. We are going to focus on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (Clapping) So, do you know what? I think we've got to start 2014 like we started 2013: We need to talk about the Gospel.

If you were here Christmas Eve, you heard me talk about this, but I think that there are churches across our land and around the world that have lost their focus on the Gospel, just like Paul says. He says, "They are turning to a different gospel. Not that there is another gospel..." But what begins to happen is that churches begin to believe, "Well, you know, things were so good; now we have to build bigger and better things to make people want to come to church." Listen. Do you know why people want to come to church? Because they hear of the grace of Jesus... and God was just ripping my heart out and showing me that. If we don't do a single creative thing, but all we do is faithfully proclaim and exposit the Gospel of Jesus Christ, then we are a faithful New Testament church, because it will change our hearts. So, this is what I want us to realize. The world is filled with people who are religious. Some of us in this room right now, you are religious people. You come to church because you believe that if you do religious activity then God will like you more. He will give you approval. For some of us, it's a negative way we look at it: "If I don't go to

church, God's going to get me." Right? You've thought that before. "If I don't go to church, if I don't pray enough, if I don't read my Bible enough... if I don't do these things, then God is going to punish me." That's not the Gospel of grace; that's the gospel of religion. Then other people have said, "Oh, it's irreligion." That idea is that I don't believe that God is real; I don't really care if God is real, so I'm going to rebel against Him. I'm going to push away from Him, and I'm going to be so unrighteous and so unholy that I can demonstrate to the world that God is not real. So I want you to hear this. I don't care how much of a hellion you were in 2013. You can't push God away from you. (Clapping) I don't care what you did. I don't care the words you said, things you did... whatever you did in 2013; right now, today, the Lord Jesus is still pursuing you. His death is still valid for you, and His resurrection has killed death for you, if you will receive it today. So what we've got is that we've got people who are religious, and they go to church because they believe that if they go to church then God won't get them and God will bless them. False. And we've got irreligious people who believe, "Well, I can just push against God and He'll leave me alone." Listen to me. The Holy Spirit of God will draw you in whether you want to be drawn in or not. The Holy Spirit of God will pursue you whether you want to be pursued or not, and guess what? I don't care if you come to church every single day in 2014, God will not love you any more. If you have done every sin under the sun in 2013, you can't make God love you any less. That's the third way of the Gospel of grace. This is the truth: God has already taken care of your rebellious sin problem, and He has already taken care of your need to be approved and loved by God, in Jesus Christ. It's already been taken care of. God's sending His Son was His stamp of approval on humanity. God's Son dying was His stamp of forgiveness on humanity, and God's Son being resurrected was His demonstration that death is dead, in Jesus Christ. So right now, there are people in this room who are like, "Whoa! You just blew away my religious thoughts or my irreligious thoughts." I want to invite you right now to say, "Yes" to Jesus before we go any further. Can we just do this real quick?

Everybody just bow your heads right now. Nobody looking around. Somebody right here today, you say, "Do you know what I need? I need to receive this kind of Gospel; the Gospel of grace of Jesus Christ. I need to say 'Yes' to the cross. I need to stop trying to be religious or I'm going to stop trying to rebel against it; 2014 needs to be different because I received the grace of Jesus." Would you just raise your hand? Nobody is looking around. Who needs that today? One, two, three, four... five, six, seven, eight... Who else? Raise your hand. Nine... who else? Ten... there you go. ...Eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen... Okay, listen. You can look back up at me right now. All of you who raised your hands...what you are saying is that "I don't want religion that's dead, and I don't want irreligion... I want Jesus." I want you to think about this for the next twenty minutes as I talk. I am going to tell you about a whole bunch of other stuff, but at the end of this service there's going to be a moment where you can just come down here and pray, and there's going to be people who love you. We're not going to take you into some kind of secret room and give you... like, you know... sacrifice a chicken or something. It's nothing like that. (Laughter) This is what's going to happen: We're going to tell you what it means to be a Christian, but we can't do that right now because we have other stuff to talk about but do not leave here today without saying, "I want to find out the next steps to being a Christian." Okay? Some of you men and women who are in this room who already know, I'm going to need you to help me at the end of the service, if all these people come forward, okay? I see you back there Brother Craig... You can come help me, okay? Alright. So here's what's going to happen. Now we're going to move on.

## GOSPEL.

### 1. Commitment to prayer.

As the Lord is beginning to break my heart and rip my heart over that, I began to realize, "I don't want to be clever in 2014." So what are we going to do? Let me tell you the first thing that we are going to do. We're going to focus on "Gospel. Grow. Go." in 2014, and this is what we're going to start in 2014. We're going to start with the Gospel, and the first thing we're going to do is we're going to make a recommitment to the foundation of prayer in 2014. Now, you know, when we start talking about prayer people go, "Ohhh... praying. Kind of boring." If you think that prayer is boring, you don't know what prayer is. Prayer is the foundation of everything that happens in this church. Why? Because if we believe that everything that happens does happen because of God, then we've got to get on our face and we're going to say, "God, move in this church." This is what I want you to know. I read this quote... I was reading a book called, "How to Pray" by R.A. Torrey. It's a book about a hundred years old, and listen to this quote that I saw: "The great cry of our day is work, work, work... New organizations, new methods, new machinery. The great need of our day is prayer." Do you want to know how this church is going to become great? Because we say, "God, we can't do it. You can do it." I don't care if we start new programs tomorrow. If they're not grounded in prayer, they will flop. We need prayer. So what are we going to do? I'm going to ask you and challenge you to pray for our church.

There was a woman that I knew when I was growing up. Her name was Berian Tensley, and every time she would see me she would say, "Steve, I pray for you every day." You know, as a kid, you can't appreciate that. Even as a young Pastor, I don't think I appreciated that. Now, whenever people come up to me and they say, "I pray for you every day." I say, "Thank you. Please do not stop because I need it." If you, right now, would just commit: "Every morning I will say 'Lord, bless Houston Northwest. Empower Houston Northwest.'" That would be incredible. Please commit to do that.

Here's another thing I would love to ask you to do. If you get to worship a little early... You know, your friends aren't here yet, or whatever. Would you just take five minutes and just pray over the chairs around you, and this is the prayer I want you to pray: "Lord, would You change hearts in these chairs today. If people need to repent, let them repent. If they need to be saved, let them be saved. You do whatever..." And just pray over those chairs.

On Wednesday nights... I'll talk more about this is a second, but I'm going to be leading a Bible study and there will be some other things happening, but at the conclusion of my Bible study that I'll lead every Wednesday night, we're going to take about ten to fifteen minutes. We're going to sit around tables, and we're just going to pray for our church. Now, if you're the kind of person that you say, "I cannot pray out loud. That freaks me out." Okay, you just come and sit around the table and pray quietly. But we need to lift up our church in prayer. And then finally, there's going to be twelve times this year that we're going to have elder-led prayer... 6:30 in the morning... I know, some of you are like, "God's awake at 6:30? I didn't even know that." Right? (Laughter) Listen; we're going to be here at the church at 6:30 in the morning, and this is what I want to ask you. The elders of this church gather here, and they pray over this city and they pray for this church. If you can make a commitment to be here on those days that we have that, please be here. If you say, "I can't. I'm on my way to work... or I've got kids I'm getting ready at home... or whatever it is that you're doing... Would you just commit to set an alarm and pray? I guarantee you the things that we saw in 2013 can be surpassed, not of our own strength but because of the grace and the power and the prayers of the people that come straight from a Holy God. Okay? So let's commit to do that. We're going to return to the foundation of prayer in 2014.

## 2. Freedom Story.

The next thing that we're going to commit to do with the Gospel: We're going to start a new series next week... I talked about it already... called "Freedom Story." So what is "Freedom Story" about? "Freedom Story" will walk through the Book of Galatians. If you start to read Galatians, you will see that Galatians is all about Paul explaining how the Gospel is the only way to be saved and how it changes our lives. It just explodes. It's like a bomb on the playground. It just blows up all our little church toys and it says, "Jesus is it." Okay? I want to ask you to be here for that. Let me tell you what we're going to do. We're going to highlight different people. Some of them you may know, and some of them you don't know... who have had the Lord change them. Some of the times we're going to have some videos... Sometimes we're going to interview them, and we're just going to let them be shown here in our church so that you can see how God has changed some lives, and you can see how God brings freedom, because we think that those stories need to be shared, and we want you to be here for that. At the same time, we think that God's Word is transformative, so I want to challenge you to be reading Galatians over and over as we're walking through this series. There's a little book by a Pastor in New York City named Tim Keller. He's written a Bible study book called "Galatians For You." It's designed to help you understand Galatians. I'm going to be using it in my personal study to prepare for these sermons. You can go on Amazon. If you're a hardback book kind of person, \$18... If you're a digital book kind of person, \$13... If you're a used book kind of person, 99 cents. So you can get this book out there. I want to ask you, if you want to walk along and really understand God's Word, buy that book. If you get some insights, send them to me. I am not proud, I will steal your insights. I will give you credit, "Hey, you know; I got an email from so-and-so this week. Man, they showed me this." I want us to really understand what God's Word has to say, as we go through the Gospel of grace through Galatians. Okay. So that's going to be a very, very powerful thing.

## 3. Make our events about the Gospel of grace.

Then, finally, as we put the Gospel in its rightful place in 2014... Do you know what I want to ask us to do? I want to ask us to display the Gospel of grace to our \_\_\_\_\_ (blank). What do I mean by that? You know, I think sometimes that I forget about how life-changing and how powerful the Gospel is to people who haven't heard it. Christmas Eve was awesome. How many of y'all came to Christmas Eve? It was great. I mean, God moved. It was incredible. I don't know exactly how many people were here on Christmas Eve, but our guess is that we had somewhere between two and five hundred visitors. Isn't that just nuts on Christmas Eve? One of those was a woman who is from Amsterdam. She came up to me after worship and she said, "I came to church tonight because you go to church on Christmas Eve." And she said, "I just want you to know I have never been to a church like this ever in my life." And I said, "Well what was different?" And she said, "I understood and experienced the grace of God." Whoa. (Clapping) That was awesome, right? It was great. I was just blown away by that. She's gone; she's back in Amsterdam right now, but I want you to understand this. There are people all around that do not experience and understand God's grace, and we have to take it to them. I know how some of us think. Right? This is what you think. "I've got my friend, my buddy. I've got to take him to church so that they can hear the Gospel." This is what you think. You bring him in and you sit him down, and you say, "Alright, Steve. Don't jack it up today. Alright, here we go. Get to work, alright?" And listen, I promise you... I want to do that. I work diligently to be the best that I can at communicating the Gospel. I work very, very hard at that. But I want you to hear this. Every one time that they hear me preach the Gospel, they can hear you preach it ten times because you are in their life. And do you know who they trust? I'm the paid professional. I'm paid to say this kind of stuff. They think, "He might be lying." But if you say it to them, you've got no skin in the game. They just think, "Wow. This person is just telling me because they're telling me." I want to challenge you to adopt

your \_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank).... Family... Street... Neighborhood... Office... Cubicle... And when you adopt them, you decide, "I am going to display the Gospel of grace to these people intentionally between now and Easter Sunday."

God began to work on this in our lives. Some of you guys know that I'm trying to get better at cooking so I made a bunch of pecan pies, and I went and I took them to all my neighbors. I said, "Hey, I just want to get to know you; I'm kind of new to the neighborhood, and also I want to invite you to Christmas Eve service. That grand total investment cost me something like sixteen dollars and about ten minutes... but you can do that. If you work with people, so can say, "Hey"... forget just inviting them to church. It's great to invite them to church, but do you know what? You need to make them into a disciple of Jesus right there. They may not come to your church, but you can tell them about the Gospel of grace. You can study the Bible with them at work. You can have people into your home and say, "Let's have coffee and just talk about the Gospel of John." You can do those things. You don't need to be me, because however many people we can cram into this room on a Sunday morning, it can be tenfold out in the community if each one of us does what we are supposed to do. God wants us to make disciples, so let's do that. So let's put the Gospel on display. I want to challenge you to do that in 2014.

## **GROW.**

But it's not just going to be about proclaiming the Gospel. It's also going to be about growing in the Gospel. I think that you guys already know this about me, but the bulk of my pastoral ministry has been in a rural context. That is a fancy way of saying that basically everyone was either a Christian or they at least understood the value of being a Christian. They would not really buck against it. It was very culturally appropriate. Now, I've served in Fort Worth and in Houston, and I can tell you the more diverse that the world becomes, there is a multiplicity of opinions regarding God and His Son Jesus. Right? You know this. Why do we need to grow in the Gospel? Because we need spiritual maturity; we need to grow in our spiritual maturity, our knowledge of the Gospel, because we need to understand how there are implications for God's grace in every area of life. Every area of life. Spiritual maturity comes when I reflect on and tease out how God's grace impacts the way I parent... the way I treat my spouse... the way that I handle myself at work... the way that I interact with my friends. The second that I begin to really reflect and think on that, that's when spiritual maturity begins to play out, and that's what the Scripture does for us, as I study the Scripture and I think about how it flows from God's grace, it begins to change me. So what's the point? You need to be studying and knowing God's Word. You need to allow that to grow you into the person you are supposed to be. Listen. If you come here and you listen to me preach once a week, thank you for doing that. You are way far behind though in the tools that you need to engage a lost and plural community out in Houston, Texas. It's just not enough. It doesn't matter if I preach for five hours a week, it's not enough. You need more. So what do you need? You need to allow yourself to be disciplined and to be trained up in Godliness. So let me tell you about some of the ways that you need that.

### **1. Life Groups.**

You need a Life Group. If you're not in a Life Group, this is our primary vehicle. It's a place where you can go and you can get biblical community and grow in your knowledge of God's Word. I want to challenge you to go join one. Now we're going to have a bunch of different Life Groups that are about to start up. These are a little different. These are some six- and twelve-week groups. Some of our Life Groups meet on into perpetuity. They just keep meeting forever. These will be kind of be some shorter ones where you can meet some people, try out biblical community, and then maybe launch a more established permanent Life Group out of that. These will be starting January 19<sup>th</sup>, next Sunday: Preparing for Biblical Marriage. If you

are either about to be married or if you're a newlywed, this is a great, great tool for you to get ready in your marriage. Or, "Relationships 101": How do I treat my friends? How do I treat my coworkers? ...for twelve weeks to teach you how to better have relationships. Then there is going to be an International Life Group. God is bringing people from all over the world into our church. We think that it would be great for them to be able to meet one another and perhaps create some affinity as they study God's Word together, so there will be an International Life Group that will be starting up next week. Even if none of those fit you, you can join any Life Group. There is a list of those on these handouts all around our church. You can go on the website, [HNW.org/LifeGroups](http://HNW.org/LifeGroups) and you can find those, but you need to jump into one of those. Why? You need biblical family; you don't just need biblical friends. If you go to a Life Group for about a year, I can guarantee you one thing: Someone in that group will drive you crazy. Right? (Laughter) They will be on your nerves. And you might think, "I just want to go to a different group." There's a difference between family and friends. Right? Family... you're just stuck with them. It was great for me to see my family over Christmas, and it was great to leave my family over Christmas. Right? It's a beautiful thing, but this is what I want you to know. You need a group of people that when you say, "This is not easy for me to love this person, but it was not easy for God to love me in Jesus Christ. I need to model that in my relationships." So I want to challenge you to become committed and invested in a smaller group of people that you can love intentionally over the long haul because that's what biblical community looks like.

There's another part of that I want to tell you about. Our deacon ministry... Our deacons have been working for several months at this. Our deacons do a ton of ministry that you may not even know about. You see the deacons. They come and they help collect our offering baskets along with our ushers. Our deacons also help dispense the Lord's Supper whenever we take the Lord's Supper together, but what you may not know is they are doing ministry for all kinds of families in our church. We really want to elevate that position to a place of notoriety and to be a public vehicle of ministry, so we have assigned a deacon to every single one of our Life Groups. If there is a pastoral care need that goes beyond what the Life Group can handle, then our deacons will be there to come alongside those Life Groups and serve. Then if our deacons run across a pastoral care need inside one of those Life Groups that they say, "I need some more support in this," then they have been assigned to one of our elders. Our church has six elders, and they are assigned to one of those elders, and they will bring those elders alongside. So listen; I wish that I could know every person in this room. I think that we all understand and know that I can't. It's just not humanly possible. That's why we have deacons, elders, and Life Groups. They are there to give you the individual pastoral care attention that you deserve. That's why the church of Jesus Christ was designed in this way. If you have a need from a pastoral care standpoint, you need to be in a Life Group so that way whenever that need arises, you can tell your Life Group. If they can't take care of it, they can reach out to your deacon. If the deacon can't handle it, they can reach out to an elder. When you get a phone call from an elder or an elder comes to visit you, what the church is in essence saying is, "We value you at the highest possible level that we can demonstrate." We want you to understand that. So I want you to know that that is taking place this year. I'm excited about that. We are now ready to announce that. I have been working behind the scenes on that, and it's going to be a neat, neat thing. So, I want to encourage you to join in a Life Group because of that.

## **2. Discover Sunday.**

Every few weeks, we offer a course called "Discover HNW." Discover HNW is a membership course. It teaches, "What does it mean to be a member?" It answers your questions about the church. People come. A lot of them join. A lot of them come and they say, "Oh, okay. I understand; it's not the church for me," or whatever... they move on. But what we began to realize is that there are other things that we want to offer

that we'd been putting on different days. We're just going to consolidate those on the same day, so that all of our church can come together and be trained to grow in their knowledge of the Gospel at the same time. So, Discover HNW will be offered on February 9<sup>th</sup>, as it has already planned, but we are going to call that now "Discover Sunday" where we are going to have multiple other things. So that morning at 9 a.m., there will be a New Christians class for our grade-schoolers; Pastor Jay will lead that. If you have a grade-schooler who is either ready to become a Christian or has questions about it, they should come to that class. That afternoon, from 4:00 to 6:30 p.m., our Discover HNW class for membership will be there. At the same time as that, Pastor Tom will teach a class called "Discovering My Spiritual Gifts." You say, "Well, I'm already a member but I need to find out what my spiritual gifts are so I can get involved in ministry." Boom; you come to that class. Then at the same time, we also thought, "There might be courses that we need to offer to help our people as they engage a culture that is pluralistic and has different religious views." One of the things that we always get requests are, "Could someone explain to us the difference between Christianity and Mormonism?" Maybe you have friends or family who are part of the LDS church, so at the same time, from 4:00 to 6:30 p.m. on February 9<sup>th</sup>, there's going to be a workshop called, "The Difference between Mormonism and Christianity." You can come to that. Alright? We will rotate those offerings every time we have a Discover Sunday. I think the next one is planned for April. Immediately after I announced this in the first service, someone came up to me and said, "Hey; I want to start one for creative people in our church." So, the next time we do this, I'm going to have a workshop for creative people in our church. There are all kinds of possibilities there; the sky is the limit. So that's going to be happening on Discover Sunday on February 9<sup>th</sup>.

### **3. Leadership training.**

Also, as part of that, we began to realize that more and more people keep coming to us saying, "I want to be involved in ministry. What can I do to be involved in ministry?" So, on January 17<sup>th</sup> at 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. we are going to have a very basic workshop led by Pastor Darren. This is what it is. "Help me get started in ministry. I want to serve; I know that but I don't know what I need to do. Could you please help me?" Just come to this workshop on Friday night at 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. There will be some light snacks and childcare provided. You can come and you can get that information about how you can begin serving and using the gifts that God has given you.

### **4. Midweek**

Finally, this Wednesday, as Pastor Dwight mentioned, our Wednesday night activities start back up. Now, why do we have Wednesday night activities? This is what we realize. We just can't communicate everything that we need to grow spiritually in one setting, and I wish that we could but we just can't. So what we're going to do is we are going to invite you to come midweek for a bunch of different offerings. We have a course that Stuart Sheehan and Craig Kendrick teach called "Foundations." It will start back up in the fall. It's there to teach you about the foundations of the faith and how you can be ready to be a leader in ministry. We have Ladies' Bible Studies... Well, they're all listed right there. I'm just trying to think of them by memory: Divorce Care for adults, teens, and kids. Our Benevolence Ministry which serves some of those in our community who are in need, led by Bill Smith and Earl Hudspeth, is an incredible ministry. You can help serve with that. Our Children's Ministry does a neat thing the first Wednesday of every month called "Family Camp" where parents and kids play together and study God's Word together so that you parents can be equipped on how to be a better parent. I'm going to start a new Bible Study this Wednesday called "The Gospel in Life." This is what we're going to do. We're going to take eight weeks and we're going to see how the Gospel affects a different area of life... from family, to work, to mission... and we're going to

look at that. So, if you say, "I need to know those kinds of things," then you can come and join us this Wednesday as well. There are a lot of different offerings that will be there.

So why are we doing all that stuff? We do all that because we believe that you need to grow spiritually in order to be the person that God wants you to be and to be effective. We make these opportunities available. No one can do all of them, but we think it would be good for you to try some of them so that you can begin to grow and do what it is that God wants you to do.

## GO.

Alright, the final piece... We've done "Gospel." We've done "Grow." Then finally it is "Go." So what is "Go?" Well, "Go" is us as a church going with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we think that is an essential piece of what we are supposed to do. Jesus commanded it. Right before He ascended into heaven, He said, "Go and make disciples." So it's our job now to make disciples of people everywhere. We want to teach them about who Jesus is, and we want to release them then to go and make disciples themselves.

So how are we going to do that? Well, we talked about this back in August that we want to move forward in a specific way. About a year ago, we laid out a vision and we said, "We want to become a church-planting church; we want to start other churches, and we want to begin to engage our neighborhood at a higher level." So we've started to do these block parties in the community. We've started a program called KidsHope where we've adopted and are mentoring in a school. We are going to try and increase that as well. We also want to begin to get some things together so that we can engage at a higher level.

I want to tell you today that later this spring, between spring break and Easter, we are going to have something called the "Next" initiative. It's going to be called "Next." So why "Next?" The idea of "Next" is we are not going to focus on what our church has done, although our church has done incredible stuff. I mean, we talked about that at our 40-year Anniversary, all the beautiful, beautiful things that our church has done in the past. We're going to focus on where God wants us to go next. We think that involves a future of church planting, of community engagement, global ministry... incredible, incredible things. But before we can do that, we want to take care of a financial constraint that we have, and we talked about this. So our church, over the last 20 years or so, has made about \$14 million worth of capital improvements to this property. I mean, it's a beautiful campus. I think we would all agree. From that, about \$5.3 million still is remaining in debt for us as a church. Every year, it takes about \$600,000 from our annual budget from ministries and goes instead toward debt retirement, which is fine. It's not like it's difficult for us to manage, but I think the more that we've begun to pray as a church and to think about this, the more that every person says, "You know what? If we could get rid of that \$600,000 payment to debt retirement, what could we do with \$600,000 extra dollars for ministry? Could we start another church? Could we train up another person to be a pastor? Could we send more people around the world? Could we dig more water wells? Could we adopt another school?" I mean, the sky is the limit with what we could do with that. So this is what the "Next" initiative is going to be about. It is going to be about reducing our debt, not just so that we can reduce our debt, not an end in itself... It's reducing the debt so that we can free up financial resources to do the ministry that is next for Houston Northwest.

So this is what's going to happen. We're going to do basically three things. I want to share those with you:

1. We're going to try and cut our debt in half. So today, our debt is \$5.3 million. It was about \$5.6 million when I started preparing this talk, so that's been neat. Some people at the end of the year came forward and gave toward principle, and it was exciting to watch that go down. But there's a story here at Houston Northwest that you may not know about. The building that's right next to this

building, in 1980 when the church built that, they felt that the Lord was telling them to pay for it with cash. It was about a million dollars, and so they just began to pray and people began to give. People were selling boats and fur coats and jewelry, and they were just doing this so they could pay off that building and pay for it with cash. It's a neat, neat story in the history of our church. So I thought about that. You know, a million dollars... what would a million dollars be equivalent to from 1980 to 2014? So I found an inflation calculator online and plugged it in. By the way, our debt at that time was \$5.6 million. I plugging it in... \$2.8 million, about right in half. So our debt would actually be a little bit more in half, if we could come up with \$2.8 million.

2. On top of that, we want to do some facility upgrades, nothing crazy or massive. We have a beautiful facility, but we just see some small things that we'd like to do to be more effective in reaching our community, but we don't want to go into debt to do those. We want to pay for those with cash. So, you say, "Why do we want to do that? I thought we were trying to get rid of our debt." Well this is the thing. We don't want to wait to do increased ministry while we're reducing the debt. We want to begin to do that now. So we've got to do some things simultaneously. We're going to raise some funds to pay down the debt, but we're also going to raise some funds to increase our ministry efforts in the community. So we're kind of ball-parking those, but we think that we can do those for a maximum of \$300,000. Maybe we can even do those for less.
3. Then, the remainder of the money we would like to give toward community ministries. We are thinking that would be about \$400,000... community and global ministries.

So, what do we want to do with that? We would like to, by the time we get to the end of this, have our debt reduced by half, at least. Also, we would like to make these upgrades, but then we would like to then be able to stand up and say, "We're starting a church; we're joining a church-planting network; we're funding a missionary. We are sending more people. We're going to engage an area that has no Gospel witness right now." We don't know what those things are exactly, but as we are breaking those numbers out, we're saying, "How cool would it be if God were to reduce our debt by half and at the same time we could say, "We just did ten things that we never thought that we could do." It would be amazing. The funny part about this is that our total debt as a church is \$5.3 million. You know, I'm the optimist... I have to be. I'm a pastor, a man of faith... so people are like, "Well, how much money do you think that we can raise?" Consultants we've talked to say about \$3.5 million. I'm like, "Yeah; \$3.5 million to start with, and then we're going to just keep going." ...because that's the way I think. The joke that I was telling everybody in the last service was, I said, "Hey, the good news is that we have all of the money that we need to pay off our debt. The bad news is it's still in your pockets." (Laughter) Alright? So we're going to get after it. This is the thing. I want you to understand this. We're not doing this just so we can be a debt-free church. That's kind of an "in vogue" thing in Christian circles. Don't get me wrong; it would be great to be a debt-free church. The goal is not to be a debt-free church. The goal is to be a church that is making disciples at the quickest rate that we possibly can and engaging unreached people groups and reaching into our community. So the best way for us to do that is to be faithful stewards of the financial resources that God has given us. So that's what we're going to try to do.

So I want to ask you now to start praying about how God would have you involved in that. Some of us in this room, we say, "You know what? I'd be lucky if I could give five bucks." Okay, great. We'll take your five bucks. Some of you in this room say, "You know, I could give a lot more than that," and we're going to need that too. So this is what I want to ask you. You start praying for this because when we have the day when we finally begin to collect for this to reduce the debt so we can increase our ministry, I want every single person in the church, whenever they see a missionary funded, when they see a global area engaged,

when they see a church started, I want every person in the church to be able to say, "I helped do that." Every person. And then you don't say, "Man, I wish I could have been part of that." You say, "I did that. God used me faithfully to do that."

So, that's 2014. We're going to proclaim the Gospel faithfully. We're going to use the avenues that God has given us to Grow faithfully in the Gospel, and then we're going to take that Good News and we are going to Go with it. Part of that is going to be us taking care of our things financially to do that. Part of that is just going to be us loading up and going on trips and engaging places that aren't engaged and letting God use us and change us in 2014. So that is where we're headed.

So the question now is, "What does God want you to do in that?" I'm glad you asked. So, everybody take out your worship guide there. And on your worship guide you see this?... This is your info tab. Let's all tear that off together. Alright. I already ripped it in the first service, so I can't do it again; just rip it off there. Now on one side it says "Info Tab." It has a place where you can fill out your information. If you're not already a member or a regular attender and we don't have that information, you might want to give that to us so that we can stay in communication with you. On the back side it says "Respond." These are the ways that you can respond today to what we've heard. You can say, "I want to be a Christian." Earlier, ten or fifteen people raised their hand and said, "I'm ready to become a Christian; I'm ready to be a follower of Jesus." You check that box. Here, in a little bit, I'm going to invite you to come down. You're just going to meet us here at the front, and we're going to pray over you. The second one: "I will display the Gospel to my \_\_\_\_." House, neighborhood, street... whatever that is. "I desire to be baptized." Some of us have said "Yes" to Jesus but we have delayed baptism. Listen. Being a Christian without getting baptized is like being married but not wearing your wedding band. You tell the world you belong to somebody. "I want to sign up for a Life Group." You say, "You know what? I need biblical community." Sign up for that. "I will commit to pray for Houston Northwest." You'll say, "I will pray daily for this church. When God calls the church to mind, I will pray for the church." Discover Sunday, February 9<sup>th</sup>, I want to attend Discover HNW which is membership, the Spiritual Gifts class, the Mormonism workshop, the new Christian class for kids, if you have a grade-schooler that needs that. "I will attend Leadership Training on January 17<sup>th</sup>." Or, "I will participate in the 'Next' campaign," whether that's five dollars or something at a higher level, you just say, "Yes; God, I'm going to start praying about that." And then finally, Pastor Darren wants us to get our Men's Ministry up and running, so he's just got a little survey there for you guys, and you can fill that out as well.

So this is what we're going to do. We've all got those cards there in front of us. Here in a second we'll pass our offering baskets, and you can drop that in there. But before we do that, I want to give an opportunity for each one of us to get our hearts right before we go into 2014. So what we're going to do is this. I'm going to pray, and as we pray I just want to ask you to be still and say, "Okay, what do I need to do to respond?" Then we're going to stand and sing. If you need to respond, this is your chance. So if you raised your hand earlier and you said, "I don't want religion; I don't want irreligion; I want Jesus. I want to understand the Gospel of grace"... Come and meet me down here. If you say, "I need someone to pray with me because I've got an issue; I've got a prayer need"... whatever that is. There will be people here available for you to pray with. You can come and you can talk to them. Maybe you just need to pray at the altar or pray where you're at. Whatever you need to do, don't leave here today until you've done business with God.

Let's pray together and ask God to speak to us and then we'll stand and sing. "Lord, thank you for your goodness. Thank you for the way that You've spoken to us today. God, we pray that this church would never once attempt a work of its own power but would always rest on the power of the Gospel in 2014.

Lord, would your grace guide us, not because we think we can earn it, not because we think we're good enough, not because we're too bad for it, but Lord, because we believe that what You've done in Jesus is enough. Lord, I pray and ask that You would guide each person in this room to make the commitment that they need to make so that they would say "Yes" to You. Lead us Father, in the name of Your Son Jesus. Amen."

Let's stand together and sing. If you need to come, I'll be here at the front, and others will be here at the front as well.