Reexamining the First Principles of the Local Church

Week 1: Preliminary Considerations

I don't know how many of you realize this or not, but 2025 was WPBC's 50th anniversary as a church in San Marcos, CA. This church began as First Baptist Church of San Marcos in 1975, with about 20 people who met in a bank building on Rancho Santa Fe.[1] I believe that Sylvia McMillan—just a girl at the time—is the only person still here who was a part of that original group. Of course, many of you have been here for 20, 30, or even 40+ years.

WPBC has had a faithful and remarkably stable history. In 1977, it acquired our current property—4+ acres in North County San Diego, a huge blessing and asset that many churches never get to enjoy—and has been meeting in this same building since 1983. (Relatedly, WPBC has no debt and has owned its land and buildings outright for years.) Pastor Tony is only the 5th pastor in this church's history, Pastor Steve served faithfully for nearly 20 years before him, and all of its pastors have been men who believe the Bible to be the Word of God. In fact, Don, Troy, Pastor Steve, and Larry served together as elders for over 20 years. While every organization has its share of trials, WPBC has never had a leadership scandal or one of those ugly splits that are all too common in the American church. Recent years have been a little leaner, but many of our people—like the Curnow's, the Larson's, the Perrault's, Jim and Kathy, and others—have stuck together through thick and thin, which is a testament to their love for the Lord, each other, and this church. All of these are primary reasons why I (Tony) chose to come to WPBC in 2025.

In terms of raw opportunity, most other churches could only wish to be as well-situated as WPBC. The Lord has blessed us with every advantage for being a growing, thriving church and a lighthouse in North County for faithful, biblical, NT Christianity. We're in a rapidly-growing part of what is already the 5th largest county in the nation. There are over 3 million people within a 50-mile radius of where we sit. Outside of Oceanside and Carlsbad in the west and Santee in the south, we are the only church in North County with our unique doctrinal commitments and distinctives—an area of well over 300 square miles.[2]

There is, though, a kind of 'elephant in the room' that is important for us to think about as a church. While many faithful people have stayed at WPBC—and while several came after COVID and a few more since I arrived in 2025—many *have not* stayed even when they've stayed in the area. To have land and buildings that are paid for is a huge blessing, but it's obvious that our property needs some TLC, and the plain fact is that we're short on manpower as well as finances. While it's also a huge financial blessing that we're able to collect rent every month for the cell tower, we're about $5k in the red so far in 2026 without it (which is important because WPBC is not a business, but a church). It's

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[1] Read a short history of WPBC at "Woodland Park Bible Church: 50 Years of God's Faithfulness in San Marcos," at https://wpbcsanmarcos.org/woodland-park-bible-church-50-years-of-gods-faithfulness-in-san-marcos/.

[2] There are several faithful covenantal churches scattered across North County— Presbyterian, URC, and Reformed Baptist congregations—but again, none that our theologically where we are.

also been the case for some time that the majority of people who visit WPBC on Sundays usually do not come back for a second visit.[3]

Thoughts on Growth and Numbers

According to the NT, faithfulness results in growth. That is the default. We see this, for example, in Jesus' parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4:30–32) and in the whole book of Acts, especially Acts 2:1–47 and 6:1–7. It's also implicit in the "all nations" scope of the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20). This is assuming, of course, that there's opportunity—which WPBC has an abundance of.

This is not to suggest that we care about numbers. For the record, we could not care less at WPBC about numbers because God doesn't care about numbers. The first church in NT history had over 3,000 members (Acts 2:41) while the vast majority of early NT churches met in homes. (This means, by the way, that all preferences for "small churches" or "big churches" are just that—personal preferences that have no basis in biblical principle.) We don't care if this church has 30, 300, or 3,000 people—as long as it's for the right reasons. But that's the funny thing about numbers. A church might have thousands of people or just a few, and either one can be an indication of faithfulness and biblical priorities, or of distraction or even compromise. Nevertheless, it would be hard for us to care less about numbers, but that is not the same thing as being indifferent about stagnation or atrophy.

At WPBC, we have a tremendous and unique opportunity to be a city on a hill in North County. This area is *full* of people in whose hearts God is working, and people who God plans to save and raise up. It's full *right now* of people who are not looking for trends, entertainment, or an experience, but for the truth of the Word of God. They're our coworkers and neighbors; they're shopping next to us at the grocery store and sitting in cars next to us at red lights. They're all around us. When those people go looking for a church where they can find Christ and hear the Word of God, there is no reason in the world they shouldn't find WPBC.

In fact, some who have already made WPBC their home church have already done just that, and we and they are better for it.

When the matter of 'visitor retention' is brought up, virtually all of us seem instinctively to start thinking about what kind of church people like. Maybe people are looking for a great children's program, or churches with a lot young people. Maybe people are looking for exciting music or a dynamic band. Maybe we should consult church growth surveys to see what people like. Maybe there just isn't a "market" for serious biblical preaching.

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[3] From 1/1/25 until 9/8/26, the WPBC website has had 228 total visitors from the TMS and Founder's church directories—170 and 58, respectively. About a dozen have visited on a Sunday morning whom I've met personally, and virtually all of them only visited that once. This is significant, because people who use the TMS and Founder's directories are looking for churches that take the Bible seriously. If consumers visit and don't return, that shouldn't surprise us or bother us too much. But if people who are, by default, hungry for the Word of God can walk through our doors and not return, it would seem that we have a responsibility to ask ourselves why that might be.

The instinct to think this way is understandable, of course, because everyone “likes” a certain kind of church and doesn't “like” others.

The reality, however, is that starting with what people “like” is the wrong place to start. In fact, it’s hard to find a worse place to start because it doesn't matter what kind of a church we, you, or anyone else “likes.” It would be good for us if we resolved right now to banish that question from our minds and never ask it, and never to think about the local church in terms of what we “like.”

Biblically speaking, it doesn’t matter what people are looking for in a church. What matters is what Christ is looking for in a church, because it's His church.

When people think about churches in North County that are trendy or that draw the A-list crowds—or that have all the cutting-edge programs, or a really cool husband-wife “pastor” team—there are dozens of churches that come immediately to everyone’s mind. You know people who go to some of those churches and so do I. (In fact, some of us know people who are thinking about leaving them, or who have been disillusioned by them and have left already.)

But what churches in North County come to mind when people think of the truth of the Word of God? When you say, “Faithfulness to Scripture,” or “Biblical leadership,” or “The pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15), what churches do people think of?

More to the point, what good reason is there why they shouldn’t think about WPBC?

At WPBC, we want to be a growing, thriving church that is full of people who love the Word of God and who love each other. If we want to take advantage of the tremendous opportunity we have to be a lighthouse here in this spiritual wasteland of North County San Diego, it’s not going to come by being “dynamic” or by being the church that people “like.” It’s going to come by simple, unremarkable faithfulness to the blueprint for the local church that God has laid out in His Word.

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In January of 2026, the elders talked for the first time about the matter at hand. It’s obvious in several ways that there’s been a bit of a ‘loss of momentum’ here over the past several years, and there are many understandable reasons for that (COVID, some of Pastor Steve’s challenges, etc.). What we all affirmed in that meeting is that we have a really, really good thing at WPBC. We have a solid core and foundation and a tremendous opportunity to be a lighthouse for the Gospel in North County.

We decided in that meeting that it would be good for the elders to go back to the Bible and re-examine the first principles that God wants the church to be built on. What does God’s Word say about the church? What is the church, and why do we exist? What principles and priorities should govern our Lord’s Day services? And in light of those principles, are there ways that we can improve to bring ourselves more consistently into conformity to the Scriptures? It’s questions like these that we’ve spent the entire year digging through Scripture to answer.

As part of that, the elders decided to do two things. First, on Sunday mornings, the elders would preach through the passages that we've studied together. We've already begun doing that.[4] Second, we wanted to spend the fall of 2026 walking the entire church through this study, and tonight is our first lesson.

One more important note before we move on. Over the next few weeks, we want to resist the urge to get too far ahead by thinking about applications and implications. (That's actually how people get off-track; they start doing things before they know what they should be doing or why they should do it, so they end up doing what *they* want instead of what *God* wants.) At this point, we're not too concerned about what we should *do*, but we are very concerned about discovering what God wants us to *know* and *value*. If we get that right, the "doing" will take care of itself.

Preliminary Considerations

Before we begin looking at passages in Scripture that deal specifically with the church, it's important to take note of several foundational, prelimary principles.

1. Read Proverbs 3:5–6 and Mark 7:1–13. What do these passages teach about who's way God blesses—His, or man's?

2. Read 1 Corinthians 3:6–9. Is man able to cause anything to grow, whether plants or spiritual life? As Paul and Apollos demonstrate, what is God's means of giving growth, whether to plants or to souls? What does this say about "church growth"?

3. Read Acts 2:41–47 and Ephesians 4:11–16. In these two passages, what are some of the means that God uses to cause growth? Also in these passages, is that growth spiritual or numerical?[5]

4. Read Revelation 1:20, 2:1, and 2:5. What are the "lampstands," and what is Jesus' relationship to them? Scan through Revelation 2 and 3. What are some of the things that Jesus says to the churches? What is the significance of this to what we're talking about this evening?

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[4] That sermon series is entitled "First Principles," and you can find it at https://wpbcsanmarcos.org/series/first-principles/.

[5] In the mid 1st century AD, Jerusalem had approximately 50,000 residents, likely placing somewhere between the 15th and 30th largest city in the Roman Empire at the time.

5. Paul says that there are some who "proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition" (Php 1:17). Knowing what we know about ourselves and human nature, do you think those 'pretenders' (v.18) believed that they were doing the right thing or the wrong thing? How is this instructive for us?[6]

6. Paul says that "whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31). In the context, he obviously means setting aside my own preferences and convictions for the benefit of others.[7] Even so, what does this teach us about even the smallest and most mundane activities of life? Is 'God glorified' in what we do because we want to glorify Him or think we're glorifying Him, or is there another metric?

7. Read Psalm 1:1–3. Which people are the most successful and stable in life? What ones have God's approval (His 'blessing,' v.1)? What does it mean that the Psalm-1 man "prospers" (v.3)? How do these principles relate to local churches?

8. At what point is it finally OK to take the basics for granted and not worry about them anymore? Can you think of any sphere of life where it's OK to do that—business, sports, driving, gardening, marriage, etc.?

Questions or comments?

[6] For several stark and sobering examples of the capacity of religious people for self-deception, read Judges 17–18.

[7] Listen to the sermon "Doing All to the Glory of God" at https://wpbcsanmarcos.org/sermon/doing-all-to-the-glory-of-god/.