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THE PURPOSE

When you see the mainstream culture deteriorating, look closer, and you will probably see a people of God who have withdrawn from the culture and turned it over to the unrighteous to rule. A divided culture can only reflect one thing: a divided church. And by “divided,” I’m not just talking about division along racial, cultural or class lines. Unfortunately, the division looms much larger than that. In our post-modern culture today, we are often divided on doctrine, mission, vision, and outreach as well. Consider:

- Over half of all Americans believe Jesus sinned while on earth (52%)¹

1. “What Do Americans Believe about Jesus? 5 Popular Beliefs,” Barna, April 1, 2015, <https://www.barna.com/research/what-do-americans-believe-about-jesus-5-popular-beliefs/>.

- Nearly half (47%) of Christian Millennials (those born in 1984–1988) agree that “it is wrong to share one’s personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith.”²
- 52% of US Protestants believe that faith alone is not enough for salvation, but rather ascribe to faith and good works as the way into heaven.³

I could go on with these alarming realities, but I think you get the picture: we have lost our way within the church. Granted, polls and studies do leave room for subjective interpretations and other studies performed by groups outside of Barna and Pew (quoted above) have not landed on as dismal of results. But even though they may not be *as* dismal, they are revealing a Christian culture at a collective loss for doctrinal truth.

God’s people have been called to influence society. Unfortunately, with our shift in emphasis to seeker-sensitive, prosperity-promoting, sin-marginalizing, entertainment-experiencing churches, that influence may not always be a good thing. What we need now—from our kingdom-minded

2. “Almost Half of Practicing Christian Millennials Say Evangelism Is Wrong,” Barna, February 5, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/millennials-oppose-evangelism/>.

3. “U.S. Protestants Are Not Defined by Reformation-Era Controversies 500 Years Later,” Pew Research Center, August 31, 2017, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/08/31/u-s-protestants-are-not-defined-by-reformation-era-controversies-500-years-later/>. Eighty-one percent of Catholics believe the same.

pastors and church leaders is a return to the fundamentals of the faith. If we are going to carry out the commission of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to impact culture for good, we must return to a focus on evangelism and discipleship that results in spiritual and social transformation.

Discipleship is that *developmental process that progressively brings Christians from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity so that they are then able to reproduce the process with someone else*. The singular, overarching goal of a disciple is to bring all of life under the lordship of Jesus Christ and then help someone else to do the same.

Yet, you cannot make disciples out of the lost. The nations are not told to come to Christians for the gospel. We need to go to them. The church is not doing the work of the church if we are not winning souls to Christ. We must keep evangelism (with the goal of making disciples) front and center in the life of the church. If the church is going to grow by making disciples, we have to have people who are willing to go into the whole world as Christ's kingdom witnesses.

Evangelism is defined as *sharing the good news of Christ's substitutionary death and resurrection and His free offer of forgiveness for sin and eternal life to all who, by faith, come to Him to receive it*. Evangelism and making disciples is done with the clear intent of bringing the hearer to faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. People must be born from above into the kingdom before they can be developed into disciples of

the kingdom. The church, then, must challenge, encourage, and equip its members to effectively share their faith with unbelievers. Your role as a pastor involves both inspiring and preparing your flock for evangelism and making disciples, in addition to your own evangelizing through your preaching, teaching, and in your personal relationships.

Entire books have been written on the church's mission, but perhaps the most comprehensive summary of our calling is the text commonly called the Great Commission (see Matt. 28:16–20). This Great Commission summarizes the twofold mission of the church which is to evangelize (lead people into the kingdom) and disciple (develop believers to become full-time Christ followers). These are some of the last words of Jesus Christ before His ascension to heaven, which makes them crucial for that reason alone. But these are also very important words because they contain Christ's final instructions to His church.

Jesus articulated the church's mission when He met with His followers in Galilee after the resurrection (see Mark 16:7). Matthew 28:16 says, "The eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated." This was the only organized meeting He called during the forty days He was on earth between His resurrection and ascension. There were actually three groups at this meeting, including the eleven apostles (Judas was dead) and a second group that Paul called the "more than five hundred brethren"

who saw the risen Christ at the same time (1 Cor. 15:6).

The third group at this all-important meeting was there in spirit. This includes all believers from that day until Jesus comes again. How do I know we are part of the Great Commission meeting? Because Jesus said His commission to make disciples is in effect “even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20), which hasn’t come yet. So the Lord’s instructions are for us as pastors and church leaders and our congregants.

WE MUST GO

Jesus began His proclamation to us with these words: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, *teaching* them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19–20). Notice that we are not just discipling individuals, but whole people groups, which includes influencing the social, political, and economic systems that affect their lives.

The first of the three things we need to do in our evangelistic mission is to be intentional in evangelism in our everyday lives. Jesus’ Great Commission blends both evangelism and discipleship in order to impact a person holistically. It begins with evangelism; however, once a person trusts in Christ for salvation, then the next phase involves discipleship. Both are to be carried out as we go about our everyday lives. The idea here

is, “As you go, make disciples.” In other words, Jesus expects us to be going out. We could even say that our going is assumed. What we are talking about is the ministry of evangelism.

WE MUST BAPTIZE

Jesus said that another part of this charge is baptizing those who have accepted Christ. He was not telling us simply to get people wet. The problem in too many cases is that people go into baptism as dry sinners and come out as wet ones. There is much more to baptism than just undergoing a ritual involving water.

In fact, the primary theological meaning of the Greek word for baptism is “identification.” This was a very picturesque word in New Testament days. It was used of dipping a cloth into a dye so that the cloth became completely identified with the dye by absorbing its color. The cloth was immersed in the dye until it took on the character of the dye. The cloth underwent a complete identity change.

This is the picture behind Romans 6:3–4, where Paul wrote,

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him

through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

When we put our trust in Christ, we became so completely identified with Him that His death and resurrection to new life became our death and resurrection. When we immerse believers in the waters of baptism, we are picturing their death to the old life and resurrection to a new way of life. That happened the moment they trusted Christ, but the ordinance of water baptism was given to the church as an outward testimony to this inward change. It is a public declaration of a person's personal conversion, as well as a willingness to be publicly identified as a visible, verbal follower of Christ. Baptism, then, is related to discipleship and not just conversion.

Many Christians struggle in their daily lives because they don't understand their new identity. They don't know who they are in Christ. You see, our identity used to be in Adam, but not anymore. We have to realize that being "in Christ" is such a radically new way of life that whatever happens to Christ happens to us. That's why the Bible says that when Christ died we died, and when Christ arose from the dead we arose. Now that we are in Christ, we have been accepted by God. We don't have to try to make God like us. So, if you're on a performance treadmill in your Christian life trying to

do all the right things and keep God happy with you, get off that thing and start living like someone who is identified with Christ and accepted by Him. Christ must be the reference point for both our decisions and our actions.

It's like putting a letter in an envelope and sealing it shut. When I do that, I don't have to ask where the letter is because the letter is safely sealed inside the envelope. So wherever the envelope goes, the letter will go too—and it's against the law for anyone but the recipient of that sealed envelope to break that seal.

Christ is the envelope, and we are the letter. We are *in Christ*. The Bible says that when you believed on Jesus Christ “you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Eph. 1:13). How do I know I am going to heaven? Not because I'm a preacher, but because I am in Christ, and He is already seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven. I am linked with Christ forever by virtue of His grace in saving, sealing, and keeping me.

WE MUST TEACH

Once people have believed the gospel and have been identified with Christ, we must teach them “to observe all that I commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). As a church leader, I am sure you can really get into this one. But teaching the nations involves more than teaching them theology, Christology, sote-

riology, and all the other “ologies” of the faith. Jesus said the goal is that people “observe” or *obey* all that He commanded us. Of course, our teaching must have solid content, because Christians are people of the truth and people of the Book. Jesus’ commands that we are to obey are contained in the Word. But the goal is not content alone. The goal of biblical teaching is to combine information and knowledge with skill in applying the truth to daily life.

That’s why, for example, after Jesus fed four thousand people, He “immediately” had His disciples get into a boat and head out (see Mark 8:1–10). According to Mark 8:14–21, Jesus wanted them to apply the lesson they had just learned about His power to meet their needs. There wasn’t enough food on board for the group, and the disciples were trying to figure out what they were going to eat. So Jesus asked them some pointed questions that ended with, “Do you not yet understand?” (v. 21). Obviously they didn’t, but you can be sure they thought about it for a long time and eventually the message got through.

WRAPPING IT UP

Our witness to the world starts with evangelism and carries on through the process of discipleship in promoting personal spiritual development. It is not only handing out a tract or giving a Gospel message. We limit our effectiveness in carry-

ing out Christ's commission when we fail to understand the holistic nature of evangelism, including both the scope and content of the Gospel.

Evangelism, done rightly, is no easy thing. That's why Jesus closed the Great Commission with a tremendous promise of His presence (see Matt. 28:20). As the Lord of the church, Jesus promises us an even greater opportunity to witness His abiding presence and power to carry out His commission. This is more than a promise of Christ's presence with us as individual believers to deal with situations in our daily lives, although of course He is always with us and His authority and presence remain with us due to His promise "I am with you always" (Matt. 28:20). This is Christ's authority given to the church to make disciples of all the nations. But to position our congregants to witness the firsthand experience of God's authority and presence, we have to inspire and prepare our congregants to be more than just pew-sitters or attenders when it comes to the church and its ministry.

Jesus' promise in the context of the Great Commission means that when local churches are doing what He commanded, they are going to have a greater ability to witness the full manifestation of his working presence and power in answer to prayer that they wouldn't have otherwise. They are going to tap into the offered authority in ministry Jesus has promised. They are going to see God show up in ways that go beyond the normal and expected. Conversely, Jesus lessens

the visual demonstration of His authoritative presence when discipleship is missing (see John 2:23–25).

This promise is so incredible that if we're not seeing this kind of kingdom authority and power being exercised in the church, we need to ask ourselves why. When the church is committed to the mission of making disciples, initiated by evangelism, we have Jesus' permission to use His name, His authority, His rights, and His privileges. That's all we will ever need to accomplish the church's kingdom assignment.

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