

# HELPING PEOPLE TO FAITH

## *Our Mission*

**John 12:37-41; 2 Corinthians 4:1-10**

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Are you a believer in Jesus? Then you have a mission. A divine mission. Mother Theresa knew her mission and she pursued it. She knew God called her and she did not lose focus. In time, hundreds and thousands joined her. As a result, she made an impact.

The Bible gives all believers a mission. It tells us to make disciples of all nations. God directed Mother Theresa to pursue that calling by working in Calcutta with the forgotten and the untouchable. There she would serve people and share the love of Christ. Her work was not merely humanitarian. It was biblical, and it was divine.

We at Bethany share the call of Christian believers everywhere to make disciples everywhere. Yet as Bethany's leaders prayed, read the Bible and discussed God's leading, we discerned specific direction. We were to do two things. We were to develop a congregation that goes to people. We live under the command to go. Second, we were to bring people. The Scriptures are very clear. People need to trust Jesus, and they need the freedom he offers. Our mission is not to bring people to worship or to bring people to church. It is to bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ. The mission of Bethany is a compelling command. *Go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ.* God has put us together so that we will go and help folks trust in Christ and experience freedom.

It was gratifying to hear Brian Cooper share a glimpse of how he came to rely on Jesus and taste God's mercy and love. I'm reminded of a young woman named Essie. She grew up believing all the facts about Christ. She believed that Jesus was God's only Son and that he died for our sins. She believed that Jesus rose from the dead and lives as Lord.

Even though she believed those things, they had limited impact on her. Jesus was more a religious icon or a historical hero for her. In her thinking, Jesus was primarily framed in history. As a young mom, her life lacked direction. Her attention turned to whatever supplied the immediate needs or satisfied the current hungers in her life and the lives of her family. Some things did not get satisfied, and she found herself toying with adultery. She wasn't happy with what she was becoming and what was becoming of her family. She turned to Jesus and yielded her life to him. She experienced a lift out of guilt, an encompassing love and a direction for her life. This mother, Essie, is now bringing help and healing to many others.

When I was 7 years old, I idolized a high school kid named John. I thought John was the coolest kid in town. When John left for college, he took a nose dive. He went on drinking binges and then used drugs to deal with his hangovers. It wasn't long before he dropped out of school. For two years, there was not a single day he was not high. His body suffered and so did his conscience. He knew he was in trouble. My father had talked and prayed with John years earlier, and in his despair he cried out to Jesus. John immediately came down off a drug-induced high. His soul filled with peace as he tasted God's personal love for him. John did not just feel at peace. He felt a hunger to help others establish a relationship with Jesus. He came to live with my family and work with my dad before he himself became a pastor.

What Brian, Essie and John found through faith was a relationship where they experience love, forgiveness and direction for their lives. It reminds me of what the Apostle Paul wrote:

***For this reason I kneel before the Father... I pray that... he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you... may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge (Eph 3:14-19).***

Your grasp of this amazing love is what God wants for you. The point of faith in Christ is a relationship with Christ and thus with God. The point of faith is a relationship where you know God and taste his love. The human family lost with Adam's sin that connection to God and his great love. We lost that vital connection. Our sin and the sins of others hinder us from reconnecting. The faith that saves us, the faith that restores us is not an assent to certain facts. James, the brother of Jesus, said that devils believe in that manner. They assent to many facts (James 2:19). Faith is not an assent to facts or a confession about Jesus. It is not an affection for Jesus. It is not an admiration or an attraction. Instead, it is a dependence on Jesus. It is a reliance on Jesus, and that dependence begins a relationship. Through this dependence Jesus makes his home in our hearts. We experience God's love in forgiveness. We experience God's love through peace. We

experience God's love as Jesus' Spirit, the Spirit of love, talks to us, testifies with our own spirit and makes his home in our inner being.

The key issue in people's lives is not whether they believe certain things about Jesus. It is whether they rely upon him and establish a relationship. That is faith in Jesus Christ. If people rely upon Jesus as a hero only, they've yet to believe. If people rely upon him as a teacher only, they've yet to believe. If people rely upon Jesus as some kind of religious icon, someone to venerate because God will be pleased, they've yet to believe. If people rely upon him only as a means to escape judgment, they've yet to believe. However, when people rely upon Jesus as their bread for living, as their way, their truth, their life, when they rely upon Jesus as their saving Lord, they have begun to relate to Christ as he is. It matters what you believe and it matters that you believe; because without belief, there is no trust. Without trust, Christ cannot save you and Christ cannot guide you. Those actions (and processes) require your continual consent.

Have you established a relationship with Jesus? How did it happen? Do you rely on Jesus and taste God's love? How is this love affecting you? Are you free of guilt? Are you grasping more and more God's great love for you? What has Jesus done in your life? What can you tell people about Jesus and you? What in your life validates the claims of Scripture that people should rely on Jesus? Not what about prayer, not what about the Bible, not what about the church, but what about Jesus and you suggests that people should put their faith in Jesus as the Bible reveals him? Until you answer that positively, you need to think about whether you really have placed your trust in Jesus Christ. Until you answer that positively, how can you help somebody else trust in Jesus?

One day I noticed that a leading church woman had stopped attending worship. Since she was the boss at her place of work, I visited her there. On her turf, sitting in her office, I asked her about it. She said, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, I'm sick of hearing about Jesus. What's he done for anybody? The church needs to focus on feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and righting injustices." I saw no such dichotomy. Our church was feeding the hungry because of Jesus. Our church was clothing naked people all over because of Jesus. Our church frequently took up the cause of victims because we were listening to Jesus. This woman, however, was angry, and people were afraid of her. She could explode in tirades at any moment. She was an umpire, a judge relying upon her own experiences, her own logic and her own righteous actions. She did not know the forgiveness and love of God. She knew the moral imperative to love, which she lived out with a mixture of good and hostile actions. Something gripped her heart so that she would not rely upon Jesus and taste God's love.

The Apostle John saw that happen to people around Jesus. A number of people witnessed great works, yet they refused to believe. John remembered the words of Isaiah.

***Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?*** (John 12:38, NIV)

The Prophet Isaiah and the Apostle John could see the arm of God at work, but many others could not. For them the arm of God was still hidden. What prevented them? The Bible reveals that there is an outside power hindering people.

***He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn-and I would heal them.*** (John 12:40, NIV).

There is something interfering with people's ability to see God's arm and taste God's love. There is so much meaning in these words that are found also in Isaiah 6. But this is not the time to fully explore that. What John remembered is that God said a power afflicts people so that they cannot experience the love and healing of Jesus.

St. Paul writes:

***The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see*** (2 Cor 4:4, NIV).

Satan blinds people. He oppresses people spiritually. Therefore we need to pray for people. The first thing we can do to help people to faith is pray for them. As we pray, God touches them and directs us. Who are you praying for today?

Frequently, Satan uses fear to blind people. Sometimes people act like little kids who hide to avoid a subject. You'll find a little kid underneath a chair because he is afraid of what is coming. Some folks are afraid like that and they keep the conversation superficial. They never get personal about their relationship with Christ. They can be very religious and actually hide behind their church attendance and good deeds, continually telling themselves, "I'm alright. I'm doing the best that I can." They are afraid to be vulnerable. They are afraid to admit that they feel distant from God and hunger to know the refreshment, the relief and the joy of His love.

With little kids, we must be bold enough to go where they are hiding and deal with the subject. In helping people to faith, sometimes we need to be bold enough to bring up the subject. "I've never heard you talk about what Jesus has done in your life. I'd be interested to hear, if you are willing."

Some people have been deeply hurt, and they are afraid to trust anyone, let alone Jesus. Often, if we accept people, forgive them, love them and serve them, they respond. God pours healing love through our actions to break their fear.

Sometimes Satan uses pride to blind hearts. As we pray for people, God may lead us to do some humbling things or to confess some humbling things. God often breaks pride, not with pride, but with humility. Whatever the case, let's not be discouraged. God loves lost people.

Brothers and sisters, half of our nation is afraid that God won't love them when they die. They may be religious, but they have not tasted the work of Jesus that puts their hearts at rest. God is calling you and me to go and help them. This is our mission. Is your heart at rest? If not, you are our mission. If it is, then it is time to go. It is time to get focused and go.