

Its Imperative

Rediscovering Church:

Matthew 28:18-20

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Two weeks ago we witnessed the amazing power of God as we heard Jim Sky share his journey, as an abandoned child, an estranged father, powerless addict, convicted felon and homeless drunk, to redemption and restoration as a child of God and minister of the gospel. Jim shared with me over lunch some of his hardships. His journey is not easy; yet God is making a difference in him and through him bringing many to life. Last week, we listened by video to David Ring. David, born with cerebral palsy, plunged into despair and isolation as he suffered significant losses. Christ raised him from self-pity and a sense of worthlessness to become a preaching evangelist even though he talks funny. Dave confronted us about answering Jesus' call to serve. He said, "I have cerebral palsy. What's your problem?"

Truly, if you love Jesus, won't you heed his call? Won't his priority and his commands become your life agenda? Jesus' last command to his followers was to go and make disciples. Unfortunately, we do get distracted. We do run off God's course for our lives. That happens to us as individuals and also to us as churches. Yet Christ is reforming his church around the world. We are in the second great reformation of the Church of Jesus Christ. As this reformation unfolds, we have to rethink much of what we learned earlier. That is why this fall's series of messages is on *Rediscovering the Church*.

A week ago, I was flown to Seattle by a small denomination to speak at their national leadership conference about this reformation. Their churches are multiplying rapidly overseas, but are stagnant in the United States. As I met with their leaders and gave three talks, I discovered in their response that they had been distracted from Christ's imperative. They like much of the American church weren't keeping the main thing the main thing.

I could identify with their pain. I was called doctor much of my time there, and I told them that the Dr. in front of my name stands for: "**D**agger **r**ight here, period (and I pointed to my heart). I told them that I began my doctoral studies because of pain. I knew the gospel we have carries the power to save every person on earth from the corrupting, condemning and killing influence of sin. I've witnessed its power. I've seen life after life changed by a relationship with Jesus. Mine has been changed and is being powerfully altered. I observed that multitudes and communities were being transformed by the gospel while my ministry as a pastor was making little headway. I was contributing little, if anything, to the advance of the kingdom of God in the world. The towns and cities I served were becoming more estranged from Jesus and his saving power. The congregations I led were hardly growing let alone multiplying. I enrolled at a seminary in California because I knew there I would get a chance to study with and meet the people who are leading the expansion of Christianity in the world. I would visit with people who are leading the transformation of their cities.

As I studied and met with these people, God did something to my heart. I would never be the same. My personal mission became much clearer, and much more of the life of Jesus jumped off the pages of Scripture and became my experience. I have to admit that for many years much of Jesus' life was a story that I believed with great admiration. Yet, it was confined to the past. However, as I hung out with the wider body of Christ, parts of his story were becoming my

reality. The Holy Spirit at work in him was living and working in me in parallel ways that were new and exciting to me.

Let me share two things that became clear.

First, Jesus wasn't using people when he commanded his disciples:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19, NIV)

Jesus wasn't using his followers to accomplish his mission. Instead, his command to go came in his care for each of his disciples. He invested in them on the journey, and they discovered life as they joined Jesus in his mission to the lost sheep of Israel. On their journey they witnessed resurrection power. On their journey, they tasted the wideness and depth of forgiveness. On their journey, they tasted life-changing fellowship, the mighty works of God's Spirit and an utterly different vision of this world. On their journey they saw the God's Spirit multiply bread through their hands, heal sick people with their prayers and restore tormented souls through their commands. If they had missed the mission, they would have missed so much of the experience Jesus wanted for them. They would have never gained much of the confidence they had in Jesus or in God's love.

Most of the churches God is reforming have discovered this truth. They aren't growing fat with people by working some program. Most people don't hang around that long if there isn't something life-changing. Instead, as they reach out to God's lost children, they discovered the love and power of Jesus in ways they hadn't imagined. They grew because Jesus actually showed up when they obeyed. They saw amazing answers to prayer and life snatched from death. They saw their confidence grow and they are finding joy and purpose as they enter into this battle for human hearts.

In contrast, churches that focus on taking care of their members experience an absence of God. They find themselves primarily comforting one another, reassuring one another and relying on their own good deeds. They see little of the converting power of God; rarely do they congregate for prayer or offer testimonies of God's work. Evidently, obedience to Christ's call is a means of experiencing the very life for which you were created. It is not an additional responsibility. It is our chief agenda. Christ promised his presence in the mission: "I'm with you always." Going is an act of faith that invites and assures Christ's presence.

Second, Jesus was and is less interested in indoctrination than imparting life. The command to make disciples is not so much about teaching this or that. It is more about helping people into a relationship with Jesus where they obey everything he commanded of us. His commands are life. They sew love and life when they are obeyed. Besides how can you relate to a king and Lord if you don't obey? You see the gospel is less about believing and more about the life we experience through trusting Jesus. Jesus didn't come to be believed. He came to impart life through your belief in him. When you observe Jesus and his disciples in the gospels, when you study his early followers in the book of Acts, you discover that they focused on going and bringing people to faith in Jesus and freedom in Jesus. They didn't just focus on faith. They focused on the faith that brings life, faith that brings freedom.

Over the course of Bethany's 46 year history, we've had four pastors with tenure of at least 7 years. God sent Richard Harper initially to assemble this congregation. Through him God imbedded in our corporate life a DNA, a code of life. His *Charter for the Church* carried a three-fold vision. We were to give a faithful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, help people experience life through faith in him and join hands in this work with other believers in Jesus, regardless of their tradition or background. That is our DNA. God led Jim Ross to follow

Richard Harper. Jim in his earthy style carried a passion for the Scriptures and the gospel. Our outward vision took on a concern to be faithful to God's Word. A few years later, God led Ric Koehn to lead this family. God gave Ric a heart to evangelize. During his tenure, we focused most on bringing people to faith in Jesus. Then God placed Mark Woodward here to lead this family. Mark was committed to radical hospitality. God gave him special compassion for the hurting, the homeless and the helpless. Bethany, named after the hospitable town in Palestine, became more focused on hosting and freeing people from the consequences of sins. Our mission becomes obvious when we survey the Scriptures and God's work in the Bethany family. Truly we live with the command: *Go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ*. Both faith, establishing that trusting relationship with Jesus, and freedom, experiencing life in Jesus' name, is our corporate call. People need to come to faith and freedom in Jesus. Without that, they and we all live in death.

This last September 1st Irina and her two sons, Mark, 9, and Arthur, 8, were softly singing hymns in the sweltering gym of Beslan Middle School No. 1. Irina held Arthur tightly and prayed aloud for God to touch the terrorist who was gripping a machine gun as he stood guard behind her. Hours later Arthur's little body went limp in her arms as he was killed from shrapnel that hit his head. After her son was killed, she was observed praying for that terrorist again. In fact, she and some of the other mourning Christian parents intervened with grace and forgiveness in their community that was bitterly bent on revenge.

What do you have in your relationship with Jesus that this world cannot live without? What do you have that is worth all the sacrifice, all the pain and all the suffering of a cross and is worthy of your own life? Until you can answer that, you will fulfill no command of Jesus. Until we answer that, we are the mission field, not the missionaries. Will we go with Christ?