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OUR DIVINE PURPOSE AND PASSION

A story has circulated about his last season as head coach of the Green Bay Packers. Certainly those who worked for and around him knew the game of football. But on this day, Vince Lombardi faced a difficult challenge: where to begin after yesterday's humiliating defeat. There was little he could say to his team that hadn't already been said. There were few aspects of the game that they had not practiced and analyzed extensively. The men were professionals. They knew that their performance on the field yesterday had been atrocious. They knew their performance bore no resemblance to their game plan. They were angry, frustrated, and disappointed, to say the least.

In his remarkable manner Lombardi met the challenge head-on. Picking up the familiar oblong, leather ball, he went directly to the heart of the matter. In a deliberate manner he brought everyone's attention back to the basics with five simple words: "Men, this is a football." One of his players who understood exactly how badly they needed to review the essentials spoke up, "Hold on, Coach, you're going too fast!"

The challenge before us is similar to that of Lombardi's. In the church today there are few matters we haven't studied and discussed extensively. There is little to be said that will not sound familiar. And yet there is much room for us to grow in our effectiveness at carrying on the ministry of Christ.

Just as Lombardi began that day by forcing his men to look at the fundamentals of the game, we begin by examining the purpose that lies at the heart of everything we do. We begin by lifting up our “football”—our purpose—and reviewing exactly why we are here.

BACK IN THE BEGINNING

Imagine what the early followers of Christ experienced at His ascension. Surely there was exhilaration at the moment Jesus was carried up into heaven. But just as surely some profound questions must have been rumbling through the crowd in the moments afterward. “Now what?” “What are we supposed to do?” “Where are we supposed to do it?” “How do we begin?” “How should we continue, now that Jesus is gone for good?”

Have you ever wondered about the things the believers must have discussed together while they waited for the promised Holy Spirit? In Scripture we get the distinct impression that they spent the days before Pentecost waiting, meeting, and praying together. Surely they spent much time discussing how Christ intended them to carry on His work.

Put yourself in their shoes. You have no church growth consultants to call on for wisdom. There are no other churches to whom you might go for assistance. You do not have a single book to which you can refer. The New Testament does not yet exist. You don’t even have the latest gospel tract to help you share the gospel. Where can you turn for answers to the momentous questions of direction and purpose you face as an infant church?

THE COMMAND OF CHRIST

Sometime shortly before the ascension Matthew tells us that Jesus gathered the eleven together for a time of instruction. Perhaps it was a final training and review session. In that setting He clearly communicated the mission to which they—

and we—are called. If we listen with their ears and look with their eyes, we may gain fresh insight into verses that can otherwise be obscured by their familiarity. Become one of the eleven disciples in this intimate setting. Feel the wind against your cheek and the grass under your feet as you listen to Christ communicate the passion of His heart.

Your journey together to the rendezvous was filled with speculation about Jesus' plans. Something was up. All eleven of you had sensed it from the moment He asked you to meet Him in the hills. Over and over again while you walked you asked, "Is He about to leave us—again?" Concern over the possibility that Jesus might be leaving for good punctuated your journey with periods of long awkward silence.

Jesus was waiting for you when you all arrived. It felt good to be with Him as it always did. But from the first moment it was apparent that He had something specific on His mind. He obviously wanted this meeting and the words He would say to make an indelible mark. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore 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" (Matt. 28:18-20).

His words hit home loud and clear. In His message was a single profound command, "Make disciples." You knew what that meant because you were a disciple. The others who had been faithfully following Jesus were also called disciples. His plan was that you would help others follow Him just as you had followed Him. Jesus had summarized His passion and His design for the ministry that you were to continue. It was to be identical to the passion and plan of His own ministry. Everything was clear. You and the other disciples now understood what to do—make disciples and help others become followers of Jesus like you.

Perhaps the most encouraging and reassuring aspect of Jesus' instruction was that you already knew how to win and build disciples. Not only had Jesus described what to do, but

during the course of His life He had demonstrated how to do it. For more than three years you had watched Jesus make disciples, and now He was sending you out to continue that very thing.

The task before the leaders of His church today is really no different than it was for those who formed that initial cadre of believers. *We are called to restore to the local church a passion for obeying the Great Commission.*

OUR DISCIPLESHIP DILEMMA

Wait one minute! Haven't we always discussed discipleship as an optional, though desirable, aspect of ministry? Isn't it a little extreme to elevate disciple making to center stage?

Perhaps you are uncomfortable calling disciple making the purpose of the church. Most churches are apt to refer to discipling as *one* of the things they do as a church, not the *central* thing. One reason for this dilemma is the myriad ways we use the term: "disciple," "discipling," "discipleship."

In one instance we speak of discipleship as a special elective taught for the "really committed" in a Sunday school class. In another we say it is a one-on-one relationship between a mature believer and a young Christian. We package "discipleship programs" as intensive curricula designed to provide doctrinal and practical foundations for believers. We have ministers of discipleship, discipling workshops, and scores of books that address the subject.

Yet we are rarely comfortable using the term "disciple" to describe ourselves. In fact, Christians seem to have adopted a multitiered view of spirituality. On level one are new Christians, who are young in their faith. "Regular" Christians comprise the second and largest level. And the highest level is reserved for disciples. In this view disciples are superspiritual people who go above and beyond the call of duty in their pursuit of Christ. *A disciple is certainly more spiritual and more aggressive about his faith than I am*, we think.

This confusion with terms is more than a semantic problem. It is true that we have confused our definition, but the real problem is that, in one way or another, our experiences have altered our understanding of what Jesus meant in His Great Commission.

THE HEARTBEAT OF HIS COMMAND

What exactly did Christ command in this ministry agenda? Perhaps in the past you have heard or given messages emphasizing one of four distinct aspects of this command: *going, making disciples, baptizing, or teaching*. All are important. All are fundamental aspects of ministry. But what is the main point?

The reality is that in these verses there is only one command. And it is emphatic in the original: "Make disciples!" The other instructions are participles that tell us where and how to carry out that command. Jesus intends the driving passion of His church to be Great Commission oriented discipling.

The Great Commission, contrary to many people's thinking, is not just a missions emphasis, nor is it just a focus upon evangelism. It is the mandate of making disciples—a balance of winning people to Christ, building them in their faith, and then equipping them to share in the further work of the Great Commission. *The Great Commission is the primary work of the church!*

What about the idea that the church exists to glorify God? No argument. Obviously we can say that the church exists to glorify God. But the real question is how do we do that?

In John 17 Jesus gives us the answer in His intimate conversation with His Father. "I have brought you glory on earth by *completing the work* you gave me to do" (v. 4, italics added). What was that work?

It wasn't just His death, as He was yet to die for our sins. It was the work of His life—a life of making disciples who would carry the message and method of reconciliation around the world. The whole context of His prayer in John 17 focuses on

the work He had done among His disciples and the work that lay ahead for them. That is why Jesus said, "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18).

Jesus glorified His Father by making disciples, and the church will glorify God by doing the same. His final words on this planet reiterated the message of His life: "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" (Matt. 28:19-20).

The biblical concept of discipling is not nearly as difficult as we have made it. The solution is to understand what Jesus meant when He used the term *disciple*. You see, when the eleven disciples heard Jesus speak those final words, they immediately knew what He meant by "disciples."

A disciple is literally a follower, a pupil, a learner, an apprentice. He is one who has decided not only to follow his master but also to become like him. In the book of Acts the term was used to denote members of the new religious community, so it was almost synonymous with the term "Christian."¹ It is not a mystical superspiritual quality but simply describes a person who follows Christ and intends to become like his Master.

When you catch a glimpse of discipling from this perspective, you realize it must mean helping people follow Christ from wherever they are spiritually. If a person is apart from Christ completely, it means attempting to help him become a follower of Him. If someone already knows Christ as his Savior, discipling means helping him follow Him more completely and consistently. Therefore, a true discipling ministry will include every aspect of *winning* people to the Savior, *building* them up in their faith, and *equipping* them to win and build others.

The phrases that surround the command to make disciples in the Great Commission reinforce this broad agenda. Remember the three participles found in Matthew 28? "Going" tells us to be aggressive in winning people for Christ. "Baptizing" makes clear that our agenda for new believers is to identify

them with the Savior, building them in their faith. And, “teaching them to obey” instructs us to explain to believers all that is necessary to walk in active obedience to the Savior. This teaching should “equip” people to make a difference for Him in the lives of others, walking as Jesus did (1 John 2:6). On every front, the disciple-making process described in the Great Commission is bold and aggressive.

It is time to allow God to challenge not only our understanding of disciple making but the very agenda of our ministries. “Far too many churches are active in teaching but passive in evangelism. The church needs to rethink its vision. Not only individuals, but entire churches should become involved in the Great Commission.”²

If we understand that by His use of the term *disciple* Jesus was referring to every man or woman who would belong to Him and would seek to become like Him, and if we realize that making disciples is the purpose that should be at the heart of everything we do, then Great Commission discipling could be defined this way: *Doing everything possible to help every person possible pursue Christ more completely and consistently.*

TRANSLATING PURPOSE INTO AN AGENDA

Purpose is important. It keeps our attention focused on what we are supposed to do. Vince Lombardi understood that.

Purpose can keep us from being distracted by myriads of possible programming ideas. On a pragmatic level it helps determine our agenda. We ask ourselves, What should we do in order to best accomplish our purpose?

To clearly understand the purpose and passion Christ gives His church is a challenge to every person in ministry leadership. Our challenge is to build ministries that effectively meet people wherever they are spiritually and help them grow in their relationship with Christ. This challenge is not easy. It is much easier to go along with the flow, but choosing the path of least resistance is not one of our options.

One more thing, clear purpose and risk are close companions. When your purpose is crystal clear, there are times you will discover the need to alter your course. A consuming purpose may call for new endeavors, experiments, and journeys into uncharted waters in order to be fully achieved. Risk accompanies new endeavors because any kind of change, no matter how slight, takes people into the unknown. Of course risk is not easy. Yet a firm grasp on purpose and the direct relationship of change to that purpose enables people to be more willing to take needed risks.

On the positive side, clear purpose not only enables people to risk, but it fuels faith at the same time. When we move ahead with the absolute confidence that what we are pursuing is the expressed purpose God has for us, we can move ahead in faith. We can make decisions anticipating the powerful work of God to accomplish His purpose because our agenda has aligned itself with His desire.

Risk a little now, asking yourself hard questions about your ministry. How clearly committed is your ministry to Great Commission discipling? Perhaps you are firmly committed to this purpose that Christ laid out for us, but how well do your coworkers in ministry share your commitment? How accurately do the people who share the leadership in your church understand what God has called you to? What might be done in the near future to communicate God's purpose for His church with the people of your church?

Hold up the football, and look at it in a fresh, new way!

Notes

1. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, translated and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2d ed. (Chicago: U. of Chicago, 1979), p. 486.
2. Aubrey Malphurs, "Why Are Fewer and Fewer People Going to Church Today and What Can We Do About It?" *Kindred Spirit*, Spring 1990, p. 7.