

REVISITING OUR MISSION: WHY WE EXIST

How many Christians does it take to change a light bulb?

- Charismatic: Only one—his hands are already in the air.
- Pentecostal: Ten: One to change the bulb, and nine to pray against spirit of darkness.
- Presbyterians: None: Lights will go on and off at predestined times.
- Methodists: Undetermined: Whether your light is bright, dull, or completely out, you are loved.

You can be a light bulb, turnip bulb, or tulip bulb. Church-wide lighting service is planned for Sunday. Bring bulb of your choice and a covered dish.

- Nazarene: Six: One to replace the bulb while five others review church lighting policy.
- Baptists: Change?

Baptists, especially in that last several generations of our baptistic history, have a reputation for being change impaired. Our conservative theological convictions, so vital in the controversies over the very soul of American Christianity, have crept over into matters of how we do church that have little to do with the essence of our faith. We seek to preserve worship styles and practices, church architecture, times for services, etc.

And, humans generally are predisposed to hanging on to what is familiar, what has always been. As much as we enjoy variety, we want safe places that don't change, touchstones—like grandma's house, or our favorite restaurant. In a cultural sea of change, we want church to be one of those places: safe, familiar, changeless, world without end. Amen! Our mantra becomes: "Don't go messing with things!" "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Through the rest of September and October we want to examine some things that "ain't broke," but need revisiting. They need revisiting in part because we always need to keep them fresh. They cannot become cherished artifacts of where we've been.

And they need revisiting because we've lived with them for a decade or so. We've grown into them and they've grown into us. And since they aren't inspired, like Scripture, we've come to recognize that they might need to be tweaked—sharpened.

We want to revisit our mission, our values, and our descriptions of fully devoted followers of Jesus. It's something our Elders have worked on over the summer. We want to make sure that these core statements continue to express us, to define us. We want to keep them fresh, never letting them be reduced merely to nice words on paper.

This morning, we will revisit our mission. Many of you have memorized it: "For God's glory we develop fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ who are making a redemptive impact on their relationships."

It's a good statement. It says a lot about our understanding of why we exist. It expresses properly our primary concern for God's glory, our desire to see people come to new life and maturity in Christ, and our purpose to make a difference in our world.

We also realize that as an organizational mission statement it's unwieldy. It attempts to say too much and in so doing, it becomes awkward. As we revisited our mission, we came realize that the heart of it has always been at the heart of it: "...to develop fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ!" That's why Bethel exists.

We do it for God's glory. That remains our central motivation. We seek to make a

redemptive impact on our relationships. That remains our primary method. But the core of our mission is to develop fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

This understanding is informed by Scripture. It begins with our response to what has become known as Jesus' *Great Commission*. "Then Jesus came to them and said, '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. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'" (Matthew 28:18-20).

In a democracy like ours, we lack a full appreciation of words describing royalty. We elect our peers to rule over us. But Jesus is not our peer. He is our Divine Sovereign—our LORD. He is the one to whom God the Father has entrusted absolute authority in this universe. This one, Jesus, calls us to a demanding task: "...make disciples of all nations."

Disciple is another term less familiar to us than it would have been to those followers of Jesus who heard him on that Galilean mountainside. A disciple was one who attached himself or herself to a teacher to learn as much as the teacher had to give and then to promote his teacher's agenda in the world. A disciple was a student/apprentice who followed his teacher everywhere. He determined to replicate the both the knowledge and the ways of his teacher.

Jesus commands us to make disciples—apprentice/followers. He instructed us to baptize them. Discipleship begins with the gospel, repentance and faith in Jesus expressed publically in baptism. Baptism is the first obedience Jesus asks of his followers.

Then he commands us to teach these new apprentice/followers: "...to *memorize* everything I have commanded you?" "...to *learn* everything I have commanded you?" "...to *study* everything I have commanded you?"

What's the word? "...to *obey* everything I have commanded you?" Obedience requires a grasp of what Jesus taught—learning and studying is implicit. But *information that does not result in transformation is an aberration*. Jesus called us to *obey* everything he taught.

In John's Gospel, Jesus defined that obedience in terms of love: "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). Following Jesus and loving Jesus are inextricably intertwined. Our devotion to our leader issues in obedience. We can obey without loving but we cannot love without obeying.

Let's look at one more verse. Turn with me to Eph. 4:11-16. As the Apostle Paul embraced Jesus' call on his life, he fleshed out his understanding of what Jesus meant by making disciples. Paul described the process and the outcome this way: "It was he [Jesus] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

The task of making apprentice/followers isn't done until everyone on this planet grows up into Jesus, and becomes fully mature as measured by the fullness of Christ. They have Christ formed in them to the extent that they act like Jesus because they live in obedience to Jesus.

These are among the defining texts that shape our understanding of our mission: “to develop fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.” We believe Jesus calls us to make disciples by proclaiming his gospel, the good news that Jesus died for our sins and was raised to put us right with God. We invite people to be reconciled to God through faith in Jesus. Those who respond we baptize. And then we engage with them in a life-long pursuit of following Jesus fully, becoming transformed from self-centered rebels to devoted followers.

The words “fully devoted” are deliberate. Full devotion implies twin concepts of love and commitment: fervor and faithfulness; affection and adherence. We aren’t seeking admirers of Jesus, but disciples who follow him with full devotion.

Clarity about our mission is vital. It shapes what we do and it is the means by which we measure our effectiveness.

Imagine, for instance, a company that goes into business to manufacture lawn sprinklers. They build a factory and install equipment. They hire design teams, supervisors and a complement of workers. They do extensive training on operating procedures, plant safety, corporate values and culture. They have picnics and create work teams to improve morale. They come up with a great product and everyone agrees that this is a wonderful company to work for. But they never produce any lawn sprinklers.

We would say that they’re just fooling themselves.

We’re just fooling ourselves if we do everything we do without helping each other become fully devoted, following followers of Jesus. We measure success not so much by how many show up, but by how many grow up “...to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

So how are we doing? Mostly we’re a glorious mess. Since none of us are glorified yet, messiness is to be expected.

We see remarkable signs of growth, of involvement, of people looking and acting like Jesus. We see, for instance, ladies using their sewing skills to bless people in our community, mimicking the generosity of Jesus. We hear regular reports of how you love one another in practical caring ways. We have worship that is full and rich, that comes from responsive hearts changed by God’s grace.

And we see a baptismal tank that’s been empty for way too long. We’re better at growing those already followers of Jesus than we are at inviting those outside the church—where we live, work and play—to follow Jesus.

We talk about mission in staff meetings all the time. For instance, we wrestle with providing ministry to our children and teens that is more than fun and games. Having events that attract numbers do not necessarily produce disciples who are fully devoted followers of Jesus.

We’re witnessing a growing revolution in American student ministries. This revolution is led by well-known and long time youth ministers who have become disenchanted with their methods as they watch seventy percent of their students walk away from Christ and his church as soon as they graduate from high school. A seventy percent failure rate may be OK at the plate in baseball, but not when dealing with eternal souls. These leaders are completely re-thinking how to win and disciple young people.

Some of what Pastor Walt is doing here reflects that radical shift in student ministries. You see, when the primary measure of student ministry success is how many show up and how much fun they had, we will never develop teenagers who are authentic apprentice/followers of Jesus, who have Christ formed in them.

None of us will ever be fully developed, fully devoted Christ-followers until we stand

complete before Jesus in glory. We're in process—that long obedience in the same direction. Like Paul, we freely acknowledge that we have not arrived spiritually, we have not already been made perfect—*but*—we press on.... We stay in the hunt to develop fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

This is what we're about. This defines what we do. This becomes the measure of our success. Are we growing as loving, committed, following followers of Jesus?

We invite you to ask yourself, as I asked myself this week, “How am I doing? Am I further down the road as a Christ-follower now than I was a year ago?” How is this mission playing out in my life?

And—we invite you to sign on with the staff and Elders in letting this mission define what our church family does and what it is becoming: We exist to develop fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.