

The Defining Value of Missions (II Corinthians 5:18)

I'm going to read a mission statement very much like the mission statement of many companies, "_____ Incorporated provides its customers quality _____ products, and the expertise required for making informed buying decisions. We provide our products and services with a dedication to the highest degree of integrity and quality of customer satisfaction, developing long-term professional relationships with employees that develop pride, creating a stable working environment and company spirit." Sounds pretty good doesn't it? You imagine how a company and its employees could fail to be effective and productive if everyone had these ideals as their core values. The truth is it's the mission statement of the fictional Dunder Mifflin paper company from the NBC comedy *The Office*! Patrick Lencioni calls statements like this "blather" meaning a series of buzzwords and well-intentioned ideals all lumped together and honestly mean nothing. (*The Advantage*, p.77)

Churches like companies can do the same thing. We are good at connecting very inspiring phrases and scriptural ideals then do little to fulfill them. The Southern Baptist Convention recently has officially offered an alternative name for its identity "*Great Commission Baptists*". The intention is to align churches and members with Jesus' commission in Matthew 28:19 "...go and make disciples of all nations..." While I hope such a focus causes believers to be more aligned with Jesus' commands the reality is changing names, mission statements, t-shirts and coffee mugs with slogans will not by themselves "...make disciples of all nations." The transformation from "intention" to "accomplishment" comes as we make the radical choice to individually and as a church accept the task, "...God has given us the task of reconciling people to him." (2 Cor. 5:18).

Call it what you want but those words define the value of what we call "missions". It's not a slogan or a name. It's the response to one driving question: "*Why do we exist?*" Let me say very plainly if Christians in the west, particularly the United States, stay mired in the secure comfort of our traditions we are going to continue our march toward further and further irrelevancy. The continent of Africa, from which our team has just returned, had 10 million Christians in 1900 and today there are over 360 million. By 2050 Christianity will be the primary religion of Africa and Africans scattered around the world. By then there will be over 3 billion Christians around the world and people with white skin like mine will make up only one-fifth that number. (*Let the Nations Be Glad*, John Piper, p.16-17) The growth of Christianity in the southern hemisphere is unlike anything in the history of the world.

Why is this occurring? Because these believers have decided the reason for their existence is, "...God has given us the task of reconciling people to him." The question is not, "*What must we do to keep up and secure our own future as American Christians?*" I don't believe God has a preference who accomplishes his purpose. When Jews rejected his plan for them he called the Gentiles to tell the Gospel. The question is "*What must we do to fulfill the task he has given us?*" **To answer this let's start with the problem and God's solution to the problem.** Paul said, "*God brought us back to himself through what Christ did.*" (2 Cor. 5:18a) Other translations use the word "reconciled" and mean removing of hostility between two enemies, replacing it with harmony.

Something was wrong in our relationship with God needing "reconciling". Because of our absolute rebellion against God the harmony between people and God was broken; the result was hostility between people and God. God couldn't leave that broken relationship alone because he made people

to enjoy a relationship with him forever. Something had to be done to bring people back into a relationship with him.

He was not willing to wait until we decided something was wrong and come back to him. Paul says he took the first step, *“God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself no longer counting people’s sins against them.”* (II Corinthians 5:19) God longed for people to be in a right relationship with him that through his son Jesus’ death on the cross, he created reconciliation with himself. As if that were not enough, he also made our sin his own responsibility. Paul said, *“For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.”* (2 Cor. 5:21) For God reconciliation through Jesus’ death was not enough but in that death he absorbed the sin of *“everyone”* (2 Cor. 5:15) in himself. The sin and separation of everyone was wiped out by the death of Jesus. In Jesus Christ God destroyed both the barriers and the brokenness existing between people and himself. Why? Because bringing people back into a relationship with him is his defining value. That is the story of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

The question is: “If bringing people back into a relationship with God is his defining value, is it ours?” Paul said, *“...God has given us the task of reconciling people to himself”* (2 Cor. 5:18). Paul uses the word *“task”* to describe the response you and I are to have to God’s value that people are to be brought back into a relationship with him. Because God has reconciled people we in turn are given the responsibility of reconciling people to him. Missions, then, is our actual, literal involvement of doing what we can to bring people into a right relationship with God. Once we understand this is God’s defining value then our values change and missions is the response.

This means we see people separated from God and decide we cannot live with that separation. It means we put ourselves into the solution to see people brought back into relationship with God. While we are not responsible for their sin, it means we are responsible for bringing them back to relationship with God. How do we do this? Paul said everything he did was because *“Christ’s love controls us.”* Only when we share the heart of God—a heart of love for people will we share this value. It comes down to this: wherever there’s a heartbeat there is the heart of God and there is a heart God longs to be in harmony, *“reconciled”* to him. Our reason for being is, *“...God has given us the task of reconciling people to him.”*

If you are like me you believe this reason for existence is too idealistic, too out there, too much to grasp. Yet what other answer would you want to give? *“Oh we are here to have a place for people to meet regularly in small groups, sort of like McDonalds, talk about the kind of week we have had, sort of like McDonalds, discuss what’s wrong with the world and everyone else, sort of like McDonalds, and then come back about the same time next week, sort of like McDonalds.”* One business writer says all successful organizations accept the idea they exist *“to make people’s lives better.”* Trust me: McDonalds believes they exist at some level to make people’s lives better, not all people but in some way they believe they are making the world a better place. (The Advantage, p.82-83) Does the church of Jesus Christ really exist for essentially what you can find at McDonalds? No, we exist because, *“...God has given us the task of reconciling people to him.”*

Missions is our response to God’s highest value of bringing people back into a relationship with him. We don’t exist to only make the world a better place but fulfill our task of reconciling people to God so heaven will be a bigger place.

A few weeks prior to our going to North Africa we were informed a homeless woman, befriended and loved by our friends there, had been savagely beaten to death. She so loved our friends she referred to the wife as her “little strawberry”. On a previous trip I and others had met this woman and when I met her she took my hand in hers and kissed it. On a human level her death was one crime against one person in a city of five million. To our friends it was the brutal slaying of one person created in God’s image that God wanted reconciled to him. Our friends were heartbroken and will carry her touch and love in their hearts forever. That doesn’t stop their mission for they are there because, “...*God has given us the task of reconciling people to him.*” They know that is God’s highest value and why they are where they are and we as the church of Jesus Christ exist. The harder question is, “Do we?”

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