

Recently my friend Philip gave me a gift, a beautiful pocket knife. The problem is I will probably never use that knife to cut anything. It is a limited edition knife commemorating Nolan Ryan's 500th career strike out. It's in a box and will most likely stay in a box because it is just too valuable to be used as a knife. This knife has been repurposed. It now serves as a memento, a memory aid to the talent of a flame-throwing right-handed pitcher.

Have you ever owned something of value that was created to be used but you just couldn't bring yourself to use it? Maybe it was some family heirloom passed down from a relative that now just sits on a shelf and collects dust. Failure to use that item changes its original purpose. What is far more painful than a pocket knife in a box is a church that has been turned into a museum. When a church becomes a museum somebody lost sight of their original purpose.

In one of his parables Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, tells the story of a church attended by a flock of domesticated geese. Every Sunday they waddled in and listened to the preacher ramble on about the wonders of flight. "We don't have to restrict ourselves to the ground. God gave us wings. We can fly." After hearing the sermon, every week the geese would quack an "Amen," file out the door and waddle home. It never occurred to them to flap their wings.

God breathed the church into existence for a particular purpose. Unfortunately, the purpose of the church has become so obscured that we're not sure what we're supposed to be about. So for the next two weeks I want to talk about the mission of the church - what in the world are we supposed to do? We are going to begin with a wide-angle panoramic view of the Bible as we consider our corporate calling and then next week zero in on how each of us, individually, is to fulfill the mission God has for us.

What is the mission of the church? Let's begin at the beginning and start with the mission of God. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Then He created man in His own image and said, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue (govern - NLT) it." (1:28). Did you know that God was planting a church? His vision was that the whole earth would be a temple where God's people would have unrestrained access to Him. OT scholar Gordon Wenham writes, "The garden of Eden is not viewed by the author of Genesis simply as a piece of Mesopotamian farmland, but as an archetypal sanctuary, that is a place where God dwells and man should worship Him. Many of the features of the garden may also be found in later sanctuaries, particularly the tabernacle or Jerusalem temple. These parallels suggest that the garden itself is understood as a sort of sanctuary." (*Dwell*, p. 38).

God's assignment or calling for the first humans was to multiply and fill the earth, expand the boundaries of this garden-temple until the whole planet was filled with His glory. Two chapters into the story something goes terribly wrong. Adam and Eve decided to look for another "church." Sin entered the picture and because of "sin" we all fall short of the glory of God. But

God, in His mercy, sent Jesus to solve the sin problem so that some day God's plan and purpose will be fulfilled – to fill the earth with His glory. That gives us a clue as to why we are here.

Most of us have been led to believe that the ultimate goal of life is to “get to Heaven.” You may be surprised to learn that our mission is not to get to Heaven but to get Heaven down to earth. If you fast forward to the final scene of the Bible you discover a new restored Earth as the place where God and His people dwell together. “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.’ And He who sits on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ Rev. 21:1-5

In the beginning, the Creator creates. In the end, the Creator re-creates. There is an interesting literary bridge between Genesis and Revelation that tips us off as to God's ultimate objective.

In the beginning, "the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ¹⁰ A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. ¹¹ The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. ¹² And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there." Gen. 2:9-10. A tree, a river and precious stones make up three of the features of the Garden of Eden. Now fast forward to the New Heavens and the New Earth in Revelation:

(Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. Rev. 22:1-2.) In Rev. 21:10, John says, "And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, ¹¹ having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal...The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, like clear glass. ¹⁹ The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel...jasper, sapphire, agate, emerald, ²⁰ onyx, carnelian, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoprase, jacinth, amethyst. ²¹ And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass." Rev. 21:10-11, 18-21

In the beginning, God built a church, we call it Earth, on which His people would dwell and spread His glory from sea to shining sea. Something went horribly wrong. By the time we get to the end of the book, God has restored His creation and His people are worshiping Him forever in a New Heaven and a New Earth.

So what is the mission of the church? The mission of the church is to be a sign and a foretaste of the kingdom to come. We are to proclaim the good news of this glorious kingdom and demonstrate its reality to everyone we meet. For now, God's dwelling place is in Heaven and ours is here on earth but Jesus demonstrated that these two are not separated by some unbridgeable chasm. Heaven and earth intersect and God's presence enters our place. Christmas proved it. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. In Jesus, Heaven came down. He wanted everyone to know that the kingdom, established in the beginning, and coming again in the future, had broken into the present. That's why Jesus' first words were, "The kingdom of Heaven is here." His final words were instructions about the kingdom. In between He constantly taught in parables which often began with, "The kingdom of Heaven is like..." He not only talked about the kingdom but He demonstrated what it would be like. Why did He heal the sick, give sight to the blind, preach the good news to the poor and oppressed? Because in the Kingdom there are no sick people or blind people or poor and oppressed people.

How can we be on mission for God? Where do we start? Start where Jesus started...Mt. 4:19. There are three unmistakable characteristics of a church that is on mission.

1. Any church that is on mission for God creates an inviting environment. "Follow Me" is an invitation to a relationship. If our first priority is anything other than connecting people to Jesus Christ we have failed in our mission. Churches that become museums have forgotten this basic assumption. Jesus emphasized the importance of a relationship with Him to His first disciples, **"He went up on the mountain and summoned those whom He Himself wanted, and they came to Him. And He appointed twelve, so that they would be with Him and that He could send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out the demons."** Mk. 3:13-15.

What was their mission? To proclaim the good news of the kingdom and to cast our demons as a confirming sign of the message. But their first priority was "to be with Him." A growing intimacy with Jesus is the first priority of a disciple. **You will never know the call of God until you know the God who calls.** If you don't know Him you will never be like Him. But Jesus didn't stop with an invitation to follow.

2. The second characteristic of a church that is on mission is a challenging environment. "I will make you" is a challenge to change. That's a familiar phrase to the disciples. God said to Abraham, "I will make you a great nation." God said to Moses, "I will make you *as* God to

Pharaoh.” God said to David, “I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make you a great name.” Jesus comes along and says, “Follow me, and I will make you (I will change you)...” Never forget that God loves you just the way you are but He loves you way too much to leave you that way. Everything that happens to you is part of the curriculum. Jesus’ invitation is an invitation to spiritual transformation, to bring new life and a change of heart. Jesus came to create a society of transformed hearts not a society of slightly modified behavior. His ultimate desire for His people is found in Rev. 1:6, "He has made us *to be* a kingdom, priests to ^bHis God and Father—to Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen."

3. The third characteristic of a church that is on mission is an outward focus. “Fishers of men” is a way of describing the rescue effort we extend to those outside the church who have no purpose, no hope, as we give them a taste of the kingdom to come. How do we do that? Through good works. Jesus said that you are the light of the world. "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." Mt. 5:16. As we serve the needs of those around us we reflect the nature of God and of His kingdom. Where there is hunger, many of you take food to our neighbors through Bridging the Gap. Where there is fear and uncertainty, many of you mentor a refugee who has fled violence and injustice to find a better life. Where there are people behind bars many of you visit prisoners and offer hope of a better life. Press on Fellowship. The best is yet to come.

God doesn't need us but He invites us to experience the joy of participation with Him. We are the body of Christ. We are His hands and feet. God's plan and purpose will get done through the church. C. S. Lewis once said, God "seems to do nothing of Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blunderingly what He could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye." God has delegated to His people the task of embodying His presence upon the earth. We do it "slowly and blunderingly" but *how* we do it matters less to God than *that* we do it. Because of sin, we fall short of the glory of God but because of Jesus our feeble efforts can be redeemed.

The composer Igor Stravinsky once wrote a very difficult piece of music that was almost impossible to play. After several weeks of rehearsal, a very accomplished violinist came to Stravinsky and said, "I'm sorry but I cannot play this...it is so difficult that it is practically unplayable. Stravinsky smiled and said, "I understand that. What I am after is the sound of someone trying to play it." Maybe that's what God has in mind for His church. We are not stainless steel saints sitting in our seats killing a Sunday morning. We are God's symphony, each one of us with an instrument to play. And if we will all play our parts what comes forth is the glorious music of the kingdom.

