

Transition to a Missional Community

a sermon in the series
A Gospel-Oriented, Mission Driven, and Community-Centered Church

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I Thessalonians 1:8

For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.

The famed detective Sherlock Holmes was on a camping trip with his friend Doctor Watson. They had a wonderful meal and they settled in for a good night's rest. Several hours later, Holmes nudged Watson, woke him up and asked him to look up and tell him what he saw. He said, "Well, I see millions and millions of stars."

Holmes asked Watson, "Well, what does that tell you?"

"Astronomically, it tells me there are probably millions of galaxies and unexplored planets.

Astrologically, it tells me that Leo is in Saturn.

Horologically, I can tell that it's about a quarter past three in the morning."

Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful and that we are small and insignificant.

Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a good day tomorrow.

What does it tell you, Holmes?"

Holmes paused for a moment, then said, "Watson, you idiot. Someone has stolen our tent!"

It is so easy to see the finer details and lose the power of the conclusion. We've done that. We've done it here as a church. We've learned the finer details of proper theology. We have stroked our t's properly and dotted our i's correctly. And yet, we have lost what our theology is all about. We've missed the grand conclusion that God sends; we go. So I say, with no pride whatsoever, that we have missed it when it comes to really doing the mission of Jesus Christ locally. The grand conclusion of the matter is that God works in us so He can work in the world and if we are not seeing people converted then we are missing the whole reason for God's grace in us. We may be able to see millions of stars and make great deductions but we've, like Watson, missed the larger point. We need to see people come to Jesus Christ.

You ought to see people come to Christ in your ministry whether you have an evangelistic bone in your body or not. We are all sent by God to complete the mission of Jesus Christ and we all have a part. We don't have the same part. We'll get into that in the next message, but today I want to encourage you that all of us, in one sense of the word, are evangelists. Some of us are better

equipped in the proclamation and some of us are better equipped in the demonstration, but it takes all.

Today, as we saw last week in Acts 13, the work of the mission of Jesus Christ, even in the days of the apostles, was mainly not done by the apostles. This is what's remarkable as we looked at Acts 13 last week and as we look this week in I Thessalonians 1. Paul says the spread of the Gospel went far beyond just the city of Thessalonica but the region of Macedonia and the country of Achaia, that whole region we now call Greece.

The Gospel had been spread so far and wide by the common believer that Paul said he didn't really need to say anything wherever he went in the region. Can you imagine the Apostle Paul not having a reason to say something? And yet this is exactly what he says here. The reason was the Christians themselves, new believers—not experienced pros—were spreading the joy of Christ they had recently discovered. That, my dear friend, is what God always intended.

One of the worst things we can do to a new convert is to rip him or her out of their social network. Yet that's what we do. We've been trained to do so. We must "rescue them from bad influences of friends and neighbors." We teach them that they have to come out of the world and "be ye separate," finding safety in the refuge of the church. We believe this is what God's work and activity is all about. "You can't be out in the world, it's way too dangerous," as if Jesus is not sufficient to preserve or protect us.

Let me address this. It is true, the Bible says, "Come out from among them and be ye separate." But the same Apostle Paul who said that in the sixth chapter of 2 Corinthians said in the sixth chapter of I Corinthians that if you were to have no association with unbelievers you would have to leave the world. When he said to come out from among them and be separate he was talking about people who profess to be Christians but were living ungodly by participating in idolatry.

You are not to be involved in the sins of your family but it doesn't mean you cut off all association. God saved you in your little world in order for you to be a light to that world. The church has completely turned this upside down and we've made the building and the congregation the safe refuge.

Listen, Jesus is our refuge! You are perfectly safe out there among unbelievers. They're the ones that need protection from you. At least that's the way it ought to be. The key to deploying the new Christian back into the world is to not send him or her alone. We are not to turn new converts away from their acquaintances; we are to go with them into their world. You don't throw them out there by themselves—you go with them.

For those of you who have been saved any length of time, how many unbelieving friends—real friends—do you really have? If you've been saved for any length of time you probably have very few. Why? Because we've done exactly the opposite of what Jesus commanded us to do. That's because of our wrong psychology. We've been sold a bill of goods that says we are to have no contact with sinners whatsoever. No, Jesus said, "Go and make disciples."

What I would like to do this morning is give you some practical transitional actions to help us in becoming a missional church, a church on mission. We have followed in obedience to the Lord in spreading the Gospel in certain places in this world, beyond the borders of our own country and we will continue to do that. But how can we continue to do that if we don't do that here? It's illogical. If there's a future base for the ministry overseas there must be a future base for that ministry here. There has to be people added to this work of God.

I. Practical Transitional Steps to Becoming a Missional Church

Missional simply means Jesus sends us, we go and complete His mission on this earth to glorify His Father on this earth.

A. Rethink Church as an Event at a Building to Missional Communities Being Salt and Light to the Community at Large.

Once again, I want to say that this is not church. This 10 o'clock gathering this morning is not church. You are the church. It just so happens that a good portion of our flock is gathered in one place this morning. But if we're all gathered here that means we're not out there. And if we're not out there we're not making disciples.

This is not church. Church life is not really occurring here. Look around—all eyes are on me. The truth is, this is not church life. Real everyday life is the context for the activity of God and not a "worship service." Real life is not right here. This is not what you do Monday through Saturday, is it? Do you just sit and listen to somebody teach the Word of God all the time? Frankly, I would discourage that.

There are lots of people out there teaching and preaching with a message that can easily deceive. I warn against listening to a lot of different preachers because you'll end up being confused quite quickly. This is not real life. Real life is out there in your daily activities. That's where God is busy and active. We pray He's active here, of course, but I've discovered in my own heart and life that the more active God is in my life outside of this building, the more activity I will have inside this building with you.

The universe of spiritual activity is not the church building. Everyday life is where spiritual experience is happening. It is there that yours and my spiritual development is worked out. It's not happening here. Spiritual development is not taking place on Sunday morning at 10 a.m. That's not where development takes place. Instruction happens here, encouragement happens here, but not development. Spiritual development happens in the real life, everyday experience.

Take for example the scientist who is testing the genetic capabilities of certain molecules in his laboratory. He runs a series of experiments based upon hypotheses to discover the genetic ability of that molecule. The genetic ability and his hypotheses are tested to be proven either true or false. If it is true it will be true in *everyday activity*. The laboratory will only be isolating it for a moment's time in the test, but it's a test of what's happening in that molecule all the time.

What is happening right now and what we experience here is just snapshots of what is—hopefully—happening when we're not together. That's where you're developed. Your development occurs in the real life challenges, opportunities, and temptations that you experience day in and day out. There is where you discover the power of God, not in this building. As wonderful as our services might be and as much as you might sense the presence of God, this is not where He has power is mostly evident. He has released His power out there in the world so that the lost sheep might be gathered in.

His power is released as confirmation to the Gospel. You don't need confirmation of it here in this building; you are the confirmation of His great power and mercy. It is unbelievers who need the witness of God's grace to them. We need to forget the idea that this is where spiritual development occurs. It's out there. That's where you'll be developed. As you face Satan and the dark evil spirits that will be allowed to come against you will either be developed or deceived. Out there in the world is where you will be developed and tested to see whether you have the strength in Christ to succeed or whether you rely on your own strength.

I have discovered over the years, that the best thing God ever let me do is fail. That's where I've learned and been developed that I don't have the wherewithal or the ability to challenge and face all of the attacks of the enemy. But in Christ I have all that I need. Everything. That's developed in real life, not here.

Second action.

B. Make Missions the Emphasis and not Membership.

In fact, the emphasis should never be on the group of people we call the local church. The church is not the Gospel goal, Christ-likeness is. To be like Jesus is the goal. Participation or membership in the church should be the result of a natural inclination in people wanting to be with us and like us as we journey to being like Jesus ourselves. The goal is not to get people coming here. That's not the goal. The church is not the kingdom of God; it's in it, but the kingdom is far larger. The goal is getting them into the kingdom of Christ and in this process of Christ like transformation.

I'm not against people coming here, though it may sound like it, but we have to remember the kingdom of God is larger than Oak Grove Baptist Church. Of course I would love for this place to bust out at the seams and we have to get a larger place simply because we can't house all the people getting saved. I want that. But I should be content that if God is using us to reach people and lost sheep are being brought into the kingdom of God and they don't happen to be a part of this fellowship, we should be able to rejoice that God has used us.

That is so contrary to the way you and I have been reared in the church tradition, which is all about gaining numbers, gaining people, and growing in size and resources. The philosophy is built on the idea that the more you have the more you can do. I understand that and there's not necessarily anything wrong with that happening. It's not wrong. What's wrong is when that becomes my goal.

The need to be gripped with eternal destruction and misery is huge. We need God to bless us with the understanding of what it's like for a lost soul to perish without God. Then it wouldn't be about members it would be about missions. If God in His mercy would allow you just a few seconds of the agony that a lost soul will experience forever and ever, an agony that defies description, then you would understand what I'm trying to communicate with you. If you could see the agonies of a lost soul in the torments that have been prepared for all of those who do not believe, your mental capabilities would be quickly broken and you would be driven to insanity by just witnessing a misery that I cannot describe. May God help us to understand the value of a lost soul and what eternal misery is all about.

Then we wouldn't be concerned so much with how large Oak Grove Baptist Church's membership is, we would be concerned about how large heaven's membership is.

The third action:

C. Learn to Think of Worship as Service Instead of “Worship Services.”

You've heard this and you will continue to hear this. I don't apologize. I want it to be so engrained in you that in your sleep you dream these principles. I want you to think Scripturally. Worship is not a service singing songs to Jesus, it's service to Jesus. Romans 12:1,

“I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God that you present your bodies a living sacrifice to God, which is your reasonable service.”

Service is a Greek word that means worship. When you're reading the Gospels and someone prostrates, bows before Jesus and the text says, “they worshipped Him,” this is the same Greek word used in Romans 12:1 for service. That's what it means.

What is worship? It is you giving your life in service to God, being consumed by Him because every sacrifice is eventually consumed and burned up. That's what worship is. Once again, what we have done this morning hopefully is worship but it may not have been.

We have confused praise with worship. All praise from the heart is worship but worship is much larger than singing songs. If you come here and sing robustly, even feeling something, but you're not serving Jesus on the mission field making disciples, then all we are is a bunch of singers, not worshippers. Worship is out there. This “worship service” should be nothing more than the overflow of our experience everyday.

That's what I desire to see one day, that our Sunday gathering is a celebration of how God is working through us to our area and abroad. The Lord is the real focus and we praise Him for His activity through us during the week when true church life is occurring one with another.

The fourth action:

D. We Must Become Intentional With People Outside of Our Church.

As the word sounds, it is. It's work. You have to develop the habit of being missional and thinking about the lost sheep that have to be brought into the fold. That requires a changing of habits and we have to work at doing so, and to do so there has to be an exertion of intentionality. You have to see this as the main reason that you have been left on this earth. Your purpose is to go and make disciples.

This statistic is several years old and it was done by the SBC Life research in 1994. If the world population stopped increasing and permanently remained that way, it would take over 4,000 years to completely evangelize the world with the current strategies and methodology being employed. In reality, the global population is accelerating and it will not stand still while the Church attempts to share the gospel. If we hope to reach the world for Christ we must become more intentional with our compassion for the lost. (SBC Life, December 1994, p.15)

That's why this text is so important today. Paul discovered wherever he was going in that large region of modern day Greece that the Gospel had already preceded him there because of the witness of "average" non-ordained new converts. That's God's strategy. I want to suggest to you two things we can do with intentionality.

I. Do not keep God's blessings to yourself.

Remember, God blesses the church in order to bless the world. God blesses you not so you can keep it but so you can bless others. Therefore, don't keep your blessings to yourself. When you're at work, in the office, at school, or with friends and neighbors, just brag on Jesus. I've been saying that for years. This ought to be the way we witness and testify of God's goodness and Gospel, by the way He is active and working in your life. It's the greatest, most powerful tool you have. So when you're at work or with neighbors or unsaved loved ones, just tell what God is doing in your life.

Mention the prayer that was answered, tell how God has ministered to you. "What if they don't like it?" You might find after a time that they're actually interested. You're proving to them that God is not just a religion but a real significant influence in your life. You're proving He is real, active, and cares for you. Once you do that, sooner or later, someone is going to ask you more about your faith in Jesus Christ.

They may say something like, "I appreciate that about you, and I respect your faith in Jesus, but for me that doesn't seem to work. I don't really believe that's true." Don't challenge them, don't argue, don't get angry. Their unbelief doesn't make Jesus unreal to you. Just simply say, "Well, on the same hand you can't prove that it's false either." And don't say another word. Let it have gravity and power. Let them think about that. Share your blessings.

The reason some of you are afraid to share your faith with other people is not because of their potential rejection but you're afraid you're going to say the wrong thing. You feel like you're theologically inept even though you probably know more doctrine than some preachers do. But when it comes to explaining it there's not the gift or ability. You can't give them the finer points of theology or the Gospel; you find it difficult to do so in a persuasive way, well, that's no problem. God didn't necessarily call you to do it that way. But He did call you to be His witness. "And you shall receive power after the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you shall be My witnesses." His witnesses, His *testimonies*.

2. Learn to bless people.

Here's an example. Just ask somebody how you can pray for God to bless them. "How can I pray for God to bless you today?" And let them answer. At first they're going to be stunned. But this is not a gimmick. We have to be intentional and we ought to have compassion for the lost. If you think, "Well, I could never do that," or perhaps you are thinking, "this sermon is a waste of my time, I need encouragement today." My friend, you need to be encouraged to quit looking at yourself and begin to look at the lost people and the mission of Jesus Christ around you. When you do that, your problems will begin to look very small.

Just simply ask someone, "How can I pray today for God to bless you?" Now you know how to pray for them, so pray for them and expect God to answer that. Now you're joined with Him in His mission to reach them. You've just joined hands with God Almighty—you ought to pray with confidence. God is going to hear you praying for this lost person. He's going to declare His glory and His might. Learn how to bless people.

The fifth action:

E. We Need to Change From Program Development to People Development.

Traditional Christianity's goal is to make members; Biblical Christianity's goal is to make disciples.

What does it take to make a disciple? It takes life. It takes you re-arranging your little bubble called your life—your world, your privacy, your security—and break the bubble, get out of your comfort zone and find someone to invest your life into. This is not about getting someone to pray the prayer, this is about investing in them, being with them, letting them see what Christ looks like through you. That takes life.

Traditional Christianity's goal is multiplication; Biblical Christianity's goal is to transformation.

These are huge concepts. I've spent lots of time thinking about this. I wrote this statement down as it was coming to me and called Sophie and Joseph in my office and said, "I'm going to read

you a statement and I just want you to tell me what you think,” because this sentence scared me. All we’ve heard our whole lives is *multiply, multiply, multiply*. But here’s the problem with that. If multiplication, growth, is the goal, then numbers become the focus. Church life has only one goal—*increase the numbers*.

Sadly, if you get a bunch of preachers together all they’ll talk about is the three Bs: Buildings, Baptisms, and Budgets. They’ll talk about who has the most baptisms, the newest buildings, and the largest budgets.

For example, one pastor will say, “We baptized 10 last week.” Another pastor will counter that by saying, “Oh yeah, well we went up in giving \$3,000 a week.” It’s like it’s a competition—it’s like fishermen swapping fish tales. It’s not about multiplication, although we will multiply. We want to reach people and every number is a person but you don’t focus on numbers, you focus on transformation. Hanging in there, staying with a person until Christ is formed in him or her. Once again, that takes not time but *life*. That’s how we must begin to think and live.

F. We Must be both Attractional and Incarnational.

I couldn’t find another word for *incarnational*. I don’t like the word for anything other than Jesus. What people mean by that word is that Jesus became flesh and Jesus is to live His life out now in us. That’s incarnational. That’s true. We don’t want to just attract people to us and this church service, we want to be incarnational and go to them.

“A whole person will affect whole persons on all levels; that is the goal of discipleship training . . . It involves commitment to God. Therefore, truth incarnated in life is the goal. For reaching this goal, only one method is possible—the biblical one—discipleship. Whole persons must teach whole persons; the Word must be made flesh.”—Jay Adams

That means is that you’ve must give your life to somebody just like Jesus has given His life to us. That’s the goal. Transformation. Conformed to the image of Christ.

G. Equally Emphasize Demonstration Along with Proclamation.

We must elevate demonstration beside proclamation. To make the Gospel only about proclamation has wounded evangelism and missions greatly. It’s taken out of the mission many people God intended to be in it and that is every one of us. Some of you are not necessarily gifted to go and take someone from the beginning to the end in the Gospel message and help them understand doctrine, even though you have that understanding. But what you can do is demonstrate the Gospel of Jesus Christ in serving that person and being merciful to that person. That is as necessary to the proclamation as a preacher is.

Some would argue and say that when Paul deals with this in Romans 10 he doesn’t deal with demonstrators but proclaimers. Without somebody preaching they cannot hear and unless they

hear they cannot believe. I understand that. He is talking about those who have been called to go as missionaries and teachers and evangelists, but that doesn't mean that the rest of us who are not called to be preachers of the Gospel are not equipped to share it. You are by the way you live—it's Christ in you, the hope of glory.

It takes demonstrating and proclaiming the Gospel. We must get in people's lives and show them the love of God by loving them with no strings attached. We don't love them in order to get them saved. That's wrong. We love them because God loves them. Period. They may never become a Christian. Do you stop loving them if they never accept Christ? If you do, you didn't love them to begin with and you're just as manipulative as the next person with some clever evangelism technique.

H. Change From Attracting and Assimilating to Connecting and Deploying.

Our goal ought to be to connect with people in their world and then once we have reached them for Jesus and they become a disciple, we deploy them and send them. This is huge and it's been a fatal mistake the church has made. We reach people for Jesus, and they are converted, then we bring them into the church and tell them that they need instruction and training so they can be capable to serve Jesus. That is entirely wrong.

Jesus didn't do that. Jesus strategically sent his disciples out before they were totally developed and ready. You don't develop as a disciple by just sitting in a classroom. You develop by on the job training. You learn by making mistakes. Failure is a part of this training and development. God builds it in.

There has never been a believer, including the Apostle Paul, who lived from conversion to death perfectly. Paul learned like the rest of us, he learned from his mistakes. He made a huge mistake with John Mark. John Mark couldn't cut the mustard; he gave up on the first missionary trip and wanted to go back home to mom. On the second missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas came to heads over bringing John Mark. Barnabas wanted to bring him and Paul said, "No, I'm not having that coward, that shirt tailed kid with us, he'll just run when we need him. No way. I'm standing resolute. I have a Gospel and a mission and I can't be a nurse maid to a big baby."

Years later when Paul was in prison about to die, he wrote Timothy, "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry." When Barnabas saw Mark's potential, Paul made a mistake. He miscalculated the grace of God and allowed his mission and personality to take over. It's easy to do.

It's easy for all of us to make mistakes, and you're going to. But God is training us in our mistakes. We don't take the new convert and cloister him in here and train them until "they're ready," because what you've done is suggested to his psyche that maybe he isn't adequately prepared and you will stunt his or her deployment. There will be some people who will use that as an excuse and they'll say they aren't proficient enough but, convinced they need more training, they will sit and soak up teaching and instruction and never go. No. We need to establish godly habits early.

That's the problem with us; nobody did this with us. We have these bad habits and traditions that nullify the commandments of God and that's why this is difficult for us now. We were told you have to become very proficient in knowledge before you can minister the Gospel.

The goal is not to reach people and suck them here like a tractor beam on Star Trek. Rather it is to connect with them in their world, hurts, disillusionments, and dilemmas. It is to take Christ to them and then once connecting with them deploy them out to do the same—connect with unbelievers. That's why I'm excited about these missional communities, the small groups that will start in a month and a half. It will bring unbelievers into these communities only to see the community going back out and training them how to do the same. This way they won't learn the bad habits we were trained with.

What is the opposition of all of this? What is the opposition to the mindset that "God sends; we go"?

Scott Boren in his book, *MissioRelate*, said four things are opposing this mindset.

Selfishness is the opposite of going.

Why are you not intentional seeking to find the lost? Because you're selfish. Let's be honest. Our worlds are wrapped around us, we're consumed with us, we don't have the time or the patience, and we don't want to interrupt our lives. We have our lives in a routine that is comfortable. We don't want to disrupt that. We're selfish.

Fear is the enemy of connecting with others.

Fear of rejection or of saying the wrong thing.

Pride opposes listening.

The reason we don't listen to other people is because we're too busy telling them about our problems. Pride doesn't listen to people. It's absorbed with self.

Expectations is the enemy of loving.

When you have expectations of someone and they don't meet them, what happens? You condition your love upon those expectations. "I'll love you if you meet my expectations, if you don't I'll take my love somewhere else." Our expectations of other people ought to be very low. That's the key to a successful marriage. A husband and wife that truly love one another don't require or expect much of each other. It's not about what she can give me, it's about what I can give her. That's how good relationships work, period. But when you start expecting and even demanding certain things, you establish you're your expectations as rights that must be observed, "You owe me this. It's my right. I deserve this." That's not love and it will hinder you on your mission for the Lord Jesus Christ.

I remember several years ago, thinking it was time to start these missional communities so I was reading a lot about small groups. I remember listening to Ralph Neighbor, Jr. I know it's a name you won't recognize but he was very influential in doing small groups when not many people were doing them. He spoke of his time as a pastor in the city of Houston. I remember him talking about how he had in his group executives of big oil companies losing sleep at night just to minister to the drug addicts there in downtown Houston.

He said there were bartenders in that city who knew they could call the people of his church when they had dilemmas at the bars or when somebody was too intoxicated and didn't have money for a taxi. They knew they could call somebody from his church and they would take care of that for them. There were people in his church teaching other ethnicities English, not waiting for people to come to them but going to where they were, and yes, even going to some "bad" places. We're too self-righteous to dare be caught walking into a tavern or a saloon, but Jesus would. In fact, the religious people, the self-righteous, criticized Him for doing so.

I'm not advocating that you go out to the bars on Saturday night. That's not the point. The point is that you'll go where sinners are. Don't wait for them to huddle up with us on Sunday mornings because they're not going to do it. Jesus said, "Go," and therefore we go. I pray that whatever we see in January as we start these small groups that we do not do these small groups just to check it off our list because that will restrict us from doing God's will.

Instead of doing small groups for the purpose of doing community, let us experience community in small groups for the purpose of participating in God's redemptive mission. When we get together in our homes starting in January, it's not just so we can have community and great fellowship and strengthen one another, although that will happen, that's what community does. But we get together and have community so we're strengthened to go out together and reap what God has given to us.

I conclude with what I believe are powerfully logical and persuasive questions. We've been praying for a long, long time, "God, bless this church. Give us souls. Send revival," and we have stated unequivocally that we believe God is going to do that. But how much faith does it take to believe God is going to do that if we do not prepare for it?

Let me ask it this way, how much faith would you believe a farmer to have, or should I ask what kind of faith would you believe him to have, if all he did was pray, "God, give me a harvest, give me a harvest," but he never broke the ground and he planted no seed? No, the farmer that knows God is going to give him a harvest has to break the ground, cultivate it, and plant the seeds. The longer we sit and ask God to give us souls and we do nothing to get out of our comfort and go into the mission field, our faith will mock us. Our prayers are a sham. It's time we act like we believe God is going to give us a harvest.

These are the actions I propose we follow, starting today. We will fail at them, but we will learn by them, and the life of Jesus Christ will be developed in us and people will see salt and light and some will be saved. That's God's method. Amen.