

A KEY TO MISSION WORK – SEEING THE IMAGE OF GOD IN OTHER PEOPLE

By Bob Young

If you have listened to my preaching or read my writings for very long, you have heard me mention the Great Commandments: #1 and #2.

***"Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"* –Matt. 22:37, 39**

I like to explain it this way: the treasure hunt (#1) precedes the rescue mission (#2).

Searching for, finding, understanding, loving God is no easy task. Without love for God, love for neighbor is artificial and contrived.

Regardless of how good it sounds and how easily it is spoken, loving other people, especially those we do not know, with the agape love of God is extremely difficult, and extremely rare.

Before you too quickly disagree, let me remind us that loving neighbor draws a wide circle – a circle that includes many people who are not like us at all, people from other countries, other ethnic groups, people of other languages, appearances, and customs, people in different socioeconomic situations.

At times, loving close friends and family is difficult in times of stress, conflict, crisis, pain, and uncertainty. In such times, loving neighbor is even harder.

Failure to love others is a great barrier to accomplishing the task God gave his people to do. It is a barrier to local missions, it is a barrier to domestic missions, it is a barrier to international missions.

Seeing People as God Sees Them

Until the church learns to see people as Christ sees them, until the church learns that love includes acknowledging others, seeing all human beings as equal, believing in others, empowering others, and serving others, mission work will struggle. A great challenge before the church is to learn to see all people as image bearers of God. Seeing God's human creation as those who bear and reflect his image will give new life to mission work. Loving God and loving neighbor will empower and refresh our mission work as we reach out to those the lost world that God wants to save; it will also influence how the multiplying work of gospel outreach and mission is done.

Mission Outreach. Seeing people as Christ sees them motivates the mission outreach of the church. Seeing people as Christ sees them informs **the focus of the mission**. The church exists to fulfill God's eternal purpose (Eph. 1:9-10).

Many groups and many people, making no claim to be Christian or faith-based, are involved in compassionate works around the world. They provide basic necessities, medical care, and education. They rescue children from abuse and poverty, they care for immigrants and refugees. They combat suffering, inequality and injustice. I am grateful for such groups and such people; I am grateful for their commitment and their ability to meet needs in the physical world. Where possible, I partner with them to help people, using the resources God provides so that his church can reach and serve more people, meeting eternal spiritual needs that have importance beyond this physical world.

The difference between the countless groups and people who want to help others, and the Christian mission, is in the motivation and the focus. Because Christians are concerned with God's glory being reflected in all of God's human creation and with the eternal redemption of every human being, Christians have a long-term, eternal focus and goal, seeing every other human being as a capable image-bearer of God, a person God wants to include in his eternal purpose, a person God sent Jesus to save.

Mission Empowerment. Seeing people as Christ sees them also informs **the method of the mission**, how the mission is accomplished. Seeing every person as God's image bearer means that every disciple of Christ is capable of participating in God's mission. The mission does not depend on a few special workers—the mission is

to be shared. God's mission plan for empowerment is the energy that moves mission from addition to multiplication.

When Christians genuinely view every other human being with dignity, value, worth, and respect, as God's creation regardless of ethnicity, gender, ability or disability, education or lack of education, the focus of missions and the method of missions are changed. The focus of missions is broadened to reach as many as possible as quickly as possible with the saving gospel message of Jesus. The method of missions is broadened to include all disciples, involving Christians around the world in the task of reaching their own nations, involving those Christians who can best accomplish the mission while crossing the fewest barriers.

A Bible study of what it means to see people as God sees them, those created in God's image, naturally begins in Gen. 1:26-27. The underlying truths set forth in Gen. 1:26-27 imply at least four things that inform the focus of mission work.

- God made all of his human creation in his image and likeness.
- All of God's human creation is to be valued as sacred.
- All of God's human creation is called to participate in fulfilling God's eternal purpose in this world.
- God's plan for his human creation is most fully realized in relationship with God through Christ.

These truths set forth in Gen. 1:26-27 (applied in Eph. 4:12-16) inform the method of mission work.

- God made and equipped his creation to fulfill his purpose and will.
- God's work in this world is most effectively fulfilled through the involvement of all humanity.
- Each human being has unique gifts and a unique part to play.
- The result is the realization of God's plan as the church exists in relationship with God through Christ.

In summary, a biblical understanding of mission focus reminds us that God's mission does not selectively choose or limit those who are to be reached. A biblical understanding of mission method reminds us that God's mission does not selectively limit who can and will participate in the mission.