

A Worldwide Vision for the Local Church

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Texts: Matt. 28:16-20; Acts 1:6-8

Introduction

Look at a globe and you can see the world as God sees it. Look at it, contemplate it; ponder it. Or think about photographs of Planet Earth taken from outer space. Is not ours a beautiful planet? Compact, colorful, and variegated, a single planet. We humans have drawn lines on it and messed it up, but on a globe there is no center and no top for one nation to occupy. My topic is "A Worldwide Vision for the Local Church." What is a worldwide vision? Why should a local church have one? How does a worldwide vision express itself?

What is a Worldwide Vision?

A worldwide vision sees the whole world, in all its diversity and complexity, all its problems and opportunities, all its goodness and evil, as a place of concern, commitment, and involvement. For a North American church, it is a vision that comes only when we take the trouble to be informed in spite of the oversights and biases of the media and the isolationism of American culture. It is a vision that tries hard to overcome the prejudices and blind spots that prevail in our society regarding race, class, nationality, and gender. It is a vision that rejects and resists the "us vs. them" mentality that currently pervades and dominates American politics and international relations. It is a vision that refuses to believe that loving one's own country means rejecting, hating, or despising other countries.

Why should a Local Church have a Worldwide Vision? The nature of the world, the need of the world, the nature of the church, the mission of the church, the future of the church.

-1- THE NATURE OF THE WORLD—GOD'S VIEW OF THE WORLD. A local church must have a worldwide vision because God wants to save the whole world.

God is not willing that anyone should perish. God does not see the lines we humans draw on maps any more than astronauts saw those lines from space. The church, as part of its essential identity, ought to strive to see everything as God sees it rather than as the world sees it. The world loves to accentuate differences and foster divisions between people. We human beings, even we Christians, are all too ready to take for granted the world's point of view as reality, as "natural". We easily accept as important the differences and divisions between people that the world emphasizes. But God is in the business of creating from the diversity one new humanity in Christ, without eliminating the beautiful, enriching diversity that graces humankind. After all, that was the point of Pentecost, wasn't it? How inclusive is the church's view of humanity? Is it as inclusive as God's?

-2- THE NEED OF THE WORLD. A local church must have a worldwide vision because there are yet hundreds of millions who have not yet heard the gospel in a clear and persuasive way.

These are people God loves as much as God loves you and me. These people live on the other side of the lines humans have drawn on maps, they are committed to other religions, such as Islam or Hinduism, and other ideologies, such as Communism. They are often isolated from messengers of the gospel by political and religious barriers. Creative and dedicated Christians are finding ways around these barriers, for example through what has come to be called bi-vocational mission; Christians serve in ostensibly "closed" places by being there as teachers, doctors and nurses, business people, and while carrying out their professional responsibilities with integrity, they seize opportunities to share their faith. They need the prayers and moral support, and sometimes the

financial support, of congregations that have a worldwide vision. These supplement the efforts of local believers who are sometimes few in number and very poor in resources, who, in the face of sometimes overwhelming odds, are faithful to the gospel and proclaim the kingdom of God to their people. How concerned for lost people is your congregation? Is it as concerned as God is?

-3- THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH. A local church must have a worldwide vision because the church is, in its completeness, a worldwide body, present in all parts of the world, among all kinds of people, in a rich variety of forms.

Even if we consider Christendom, Christianity in its broadest sense, it is at present only 2-3 billion strong, certainly less than 1/2 of the world's population, and about 2/3 of it today is in the non-western world. Even as western Christendom is declining in numbers and influence, non-western churches are growing explosively. Already, there are many more Christians in Africa than in North America. And the church is growing fastest in Africa and Latin America. It is, as a whole, a church with strengths but also with weaknesses. It is a church with untold assets, but these are very unevenly distributed. It is a church in which some parts--including North America--have a near-monopoly on the financial and technical resources while other parts are destitute. It is a church in which some parts--including ours in North America--enjoy all kinds of freedoms and opportunities while other parts suffer persecution. It is a church in which those parts that are poorest materially are often spiritually the richest and most vital. It is also a church in which all parts need to depend on and learn from all the other parts for the edification of all. It is a church often subject to persecution and martyrdom. We in the United States have much to learn from our African, Latin American, and Asian brothers and sisters about whole-hearted commitment, sacrificial living and giving, and discipleship. They, in turn, often need our help in financial and material ways. How committed is your congregation to the one church? How informed is it about that church?

-4- THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH. A local church must have a worldwide vision because God has sent the church to "make disciples of all nations."

God calls his church to be witnesses "to the ends of the earth". This is not to perpetuate the language of territorial conquest so favored by a previous generation, but to recognize the divine imperative to share the gospel with every human creature. It is a matter of elementary obedience to the One whom the church calls Lord. How willingly does your congregation accept its sent-ness, its missional nature?

-5- THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH. To descend to a more crass-sounding level, a local church must have a worldwide vision because the more it is in fact gripped by such a vision, the more vital that church will be in its local presence and work.

It may seem paradoxical, but local congregations that devote themselves whole-heartedly to world missions find their local life and ministry thriving. And congregations that face the wider world grudgingly, or fear that worldwide commitment will be in competition with and steal from local efforts, sees local life and ministry shrivel. God's way of looking at the world is a necessity for the health of the local church! The congregation that selfishly wants to be successful had better be generous!

Every local church must have a worldwide vision because God sees the world as one and loves everyone in it equally, because God called and sent the church into the world, because the church is a worldwide body, because millions have not heard the gospel, and because a church needs a worldwide vision for its own local vitality,

How does a Worldwide Vision express itself?

-A- It expresses itself by seeking KNOWLEDGE, by being informed about the world, by swimming against the tide of American indifference and hostility to the non-American world. It will take the trouble to study some non-western geography and some non-western history. As for current events, there are good sources of information to plug the holes and to correct the distortions in American media coverage. Many interesting and important things are not reported by the *New York Times*, *Christianity Today* and other Christian magazines, including some devoted to missions. Take seriously and disseminate in the local congregation the newsletters and emails sent out by your missionaries.

-B- It expresses itself by PRAYER, by praying regularly, as a congregation and as individual members, about the world situation. The spirit of this prayer is the model Jesus gave us: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Pray fervently for the missionaries your congregation knows. Venture beyond praying only for people you know personally or who are just like you. Pray also for your brothers and sisters who are busy proclaiming the gospel in hard and dangerous fields, who are isolated, who are hungry, who are being persecuted, who are being martyred.

-C- It expresses itself FINANCIALLY, by a financial commitment at a sacrificial level. Paul’s instructions to the church at Corinth and his instructions to the church at Rome reflect a generous worldwide vision that focuses on the one church and the need for worldwide solidarity within it. The worldwide work of the gospel is always in need of financial support. I suggest that each local congregation commit to missions a definite, regularly increasing, percentage of its budget, rather than waiting for the whims of givers.

-D- It expresses itself by TALK and ACTION. It speaks up and protests in the public arena the way our brothers and sisters are being treated in many parts of the world. It finds ways to plug into efforts around the world to proclaim the gospel, to make peace, to fight tyranny with means congruent with the gospel, and to relieve misery.

-E- It expresses itself by COMMITMENT, actively recruiting from among its members, especially its younger members, those who will work in this world mission. Of course, it is always good to support missionaries that come from other congregations; but there is no substitute for the homegrown variety. A local congregation that has sent not one of its youth into world mission has, to that extent, failed in its youth ministry. Youth ought to be regularly involved in mission studies, mission emphases, mission fairs, mission trips, and the like, so that the possibility of a missionary vocation becomes a realistic option to them.

Be informed, pray, give, act, recruit—here are five ways your congregation’s worldwide vision may express itself concretely.

Conclusion

Look at this world, as God made it, as God still sees it, as one world. Think of how we humans have drawn ugly lines all over it, dividing people from people, shattering it into fragments. Think of how we humans have pitted people against people. Turn your back on that! In your congregation, get on board with God’s program to put the fragments back together, to create a new humanity in Christ, and to bring all things under the feet of God’s Christ.