

A Journey to Understanding

By Bob Young

My Journey in Ministry

I accepted my first regular preaching assignment in 1967 when I was a student at Wichita State University. I had not been to “preaching school.” I learned what preachers do by watching and imitating other preachers. My first concept of preaching was of the preacher (or minister) as teacher. (My preaching role included teaching an adult Bible class.) The task of the preacher was to explain the Bible and make a few applications—the most important one being to offer the “invitation”, even though almost all of those present were already Christians.

After I enrolled at Oklahoma Christian College as a Bible major, I spent most of the next year working with the West Main mission. This was the first time I taught a personal Bible study and experienced other people becoming Christians as a result of evangelistic Bible studies. During my senior year in college, I accepted a regular preaching assignment in northwest Oklahoma and used a preaching model primarily focused on teaching—presenting and explaining the Bible and its teachings. Since I was also responsible for the teen Bible class and activities, I had my first experience in “youth ministry.”

After I graduated from college, my first two ministry experiences (two years each) continued a ministry pattern of teaching, evangelism, general ministry and youth ministry. I understood my responsibilities to include Bible teaching and preaching, ministry to the congregation and to the youth, and evangelism. Church life was pretty simple—stay connected to God’s word and will, build people up in meaningful fellowship and activities, and reach out to share the gospel message. My first personal experience with missions and missionaries occurred during these years; also my first experience with evangelistic canvassing and mass mailing. After we moved to Michigan, we spent two years in a church where the evangelistic aspect of ministry was largely focused in bus ministry. For the first time I met the concept of intentional church growth as a result of focused evangelistic efforts to the unchurched.

It is fair to say that these first seven years of full-time ministry were part of my developing expectation that biblical ministers serve (1) as preachers in teaching and preaching, (2) as evangelists in taking the gospel message to those who are not yet Christians, and (3) as ministers to meet various spiritually-related needs in the local congregation.

After almost a decade in the ministries I have described, we moved to a church in central Michigan where we would spend almost a dozen years. Ministry in this church included involvement in bus evangelism, an intense evangelistic focus which was a part of the DNA of the church, and a developing mission program. Ministry in a “mission field” where my fellowship is not numerically strong was challenging, but not competitive. The church grew marvelously by God’s grace. As I observed more than once, “We did not know what we were doing; we were just having fun together being the people God called us to be.” We were Christ-centered, outreach-oriented both in missions and local evangelism, and fellowship seeking in a way that made assimilation of new members especially easy. The church more than doubled during 11+ years.

From Michigan we moved to the center of the US to be closer to family. We spent the next eight years in a church in Oklahoma. The church had a significant mission focus which complemented the desire to reach out locally. A relatively new set of church leaders focused on reaching out to fringe members. We had a dynamic youth minister. We experienced a 50% growth over 8 years. During this time I continued my formal education with post-baccalaureate studies, eventually earning a doctorate focused in leadership. I became aware of all kinds of academic endeavors focused in generating church growth. Fortunately, I was serving in full-time ministry where daily realities keep one grounded.

Rethinking What God Wants

God's plan for his followers is pretty simple: God wants his people to become like him and to bring him glory, praise and honor through their lives. The pressures and challenges of ministry in a competitive religious world easily blur this simple reality. I don't know when I first saw this truth, but it has been a guiding light for my ministry. (In retrospect, my formal ministry studies tempted me to get sidetracked and to focus on the wrong things for a time.)

The modern church often seeks to attract people by appealing to selfish consumerism and by focusing on what they can get out of their church involvement. God's plan is not focused on consuming but on commitment. Ministry measurements such as attendance and number of activities (programs), size of buildings and budgets, and number of consumers present are the Siren Songs of our contemporary religious culture. As a result, few churches get around to talking about Jesus and a serious call to discipleship.

After 28 years in preaching and ministry, I moved to a teaching and administrative role in Christian higher education. I hope I shared a biblical view of ministry in the ministry classes I taught. I know the temptation in ministry to focus on trying to make others happy. I know the sinking feeling that the church will never grow unless I can attract folks. I also know the joy of seeing people draw closer to Jesus. My regret in ministry is that too few disciples were ready to go out into the world with the message of the gospel, ready to change the world for the better.

When I returned to ministry briefly after a dozen years in Christian higher education, I was more convinced than ever that the message and call of the church has to be Christ-centered. We have nothing to share if we do not share Christ. There are no valid "decisions" if commitment to Christ is not at the heart of the message. I was encouraged when one sister said to me after a Sunday service, "I think you may succeed in bringing Christ back to this church!"

Through the centuries Christianity has been strong when it called people to count the cost, to committed discipleship and to Christ-centered fellowship that sacrificially serves others. Being formed in Christ's image is not easy—such newness requires the death of the old person. We will never become like God, participants in the divine nature, until the selfishness of the past is cast off in favor of genuine compassion for the poor, the hurting, and the lost.

Jesus' plan for the church is to create out of all of the peoples of the world with their many differences and disagreements, a new body of people who will be his presence in the world, be like him and continue his work of transforming the world. Becoming like Jesus requires that we come face to face with Jesus' compassion, imitating his care for the poor, the sick, the hungry and the outcasts. As Jesus came healing, so must we address the hurts of our world. But Jesus also came teaching and preaching, seeking the transformation of the world.

Rethinking the Contemporary Church

The true measure of the local church and its ministry is whether people are being changed to look like Jesus, and whether their lives are bring praise and honor and glory to God. The true greatness of the church is measured by how many of its members are going forth into the world as examples of transformation, making God visible as they compassionately serve the world. The power and influence of the church depends on its willingness to ask its people to go into the world and compassionately work to help the world become more like God intends it to be.

When I preach and teach, my message is pretty simple: Jesus Christ and the implications of the cross. Focusing on Jesus is the first step to engaging the church in mission. The church will not go forth powerfully as a result of guilt, obligation, duty, or moralizing. Lives are changed by the presence of Jesus, transformed into his glorious image, looking more and more like him. Such transformation and renewed thinking sends the church forth into the world as salt and light, as living sacrifices, God's treasure, living out the reality of God in the world to his glory.

The church God desires does not become a reality by the decision of the church leaders or the consensus of a business meeting. The reality is not generated by more programs. There are no shortcuts. The church God wants becomes a reality when the church commits to authentic discipleship, evidenced in transformed lives that reflect God's glory and in transformed lifestyles that go forth in imitation of Jesus, going where people have needs and are hurting, ministering and helping, seeking and serving in the world around us. The church God wants goes to the community, to families, and to the world. The church brings God glory because it spends time with people in need, helps them, talks to them, tells them about God, invites them to transformed living, invites them to share the effort to change the world.

How can this happen?

How do we move our members from being religious consumers to being authentic disciples of Christ? How do we help people become consumed with the mission of Jesus?

- Focus the message on Christ
- Focus the message of the church on how Christ changes lives, and not just on the selfish motivation of salvation
- Call people to Christ-likeness and authentic discipleship
- Build into the DNA of the church the imitation of Jesus in compassionate care, including seeking and saving the lost
- Build into the DNA of the church a commitment to Christ-centered fellowship that assimilates new Christians into the body