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What's the "Big Deal" for Jesus?

It is not debatable: The Scripture is God's Word. Consequently, we take it seriously. Bible scholars say the Word of God is "inspired"—like God breathing out His wisdom. Like Jesus' teaching to His disciples—and to you, and to me.

Technically, the verb "to inspire" is the act of God bestowing wisdom or skill on individuals. It refers to the Holy Spirit guiding Christ-followers to spiritual joy and service in the Kingdom of God *in ways that strengthen your whole church and mission.*

It's an interesting word that Scripture uses: "inspire." It is more than head knowledge and way beyond human intellect. It is described as *God-breathed*. God exhales supernatural wisdom for my life—and yours—and for your church. Second Timothy 3:16-17 (TEV) says, "All Scripture is *inspired* by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living." *The Message* translation says, "Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful, one way or another—showing us the truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way." It's fascinating the way *The Message* continues in verse 17: "*Through the Word, we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.*"

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Challenges for Some Congregations Today

A great number of churches in North America (and elsewhere around the globe) are thriving, and the membership is growing. Church members are maturing in their faith. Many are living a life of mission. They understand their personal role in the Great (big) Commission. Jesus spoke: “Go into your world and make disciples—those who are dedicated to me and the mission” (my reflection).

Yet, year after year, some churches are “aging” (the average age of the people is increasing) while overall attendance is declining (without new people coming in). The end result is the closure of churches and the spiritual decline of the nation. You don't have to be a preacher, church leader, or “Church Doctor” to understand.

Is this issue important to a nation? To your town or city? Is it a big issue for you? Do you wonder *why*? Do you wrestle with what can be done? Do you struggle with how to begin the discussion? Do you want to consider the issues behind the issue? Do you want your church to reach more people for Jesus?

What Are God's Big Goals?

The Scripture includes hundreds of great acts by our Creator, our Savior, Jesus, and the work of the Holy Spirit. At the risk of minimizing all the amazing insights we learn from Scripture, are there some issues that could help you diagnose the challenges that face your church?

Perhaps you've heard about my personal journey. If so, I'll keep it short. It is an example that addresses the greatest challenge many believers face today: The aging, decline, and closing of their congregations.

My journey as a “Christian” in high school could be described as “forced nominal spirituality.” I went to church because my parents made me. (Think of all the adults—whole families that are far from God for all sorts of reasons. You know more of them in this increasingly secular society than you may realize.)

In my senior year, my parents observed an answer to their prayers. I had a “come to Jesus” moment that changed my life. I was injured playing football, had surgery, and the kid next to me in recovery almost died as I watched. God changed my direction dramatically. I was not only called to be a Jesus-follower, but God also led me into full-time ministry.

So, I started the long road to become a preacher in my denomination. The fire God put in me was fueled by all the people who don't know Jesus, don't reflect faith, and don't grow spiritually. I understood—I'd been there!

So, I went to school—a lot! Junior college, senior college, and seminary. My passion was to reach people for Jesus. I learned some great stuff—and a lot of other topics that weren't that helpful, to be honest. What I *didn't* learn? How to reach others for Jesus! I was equipped to be a “caretaker” preacher at a congregation. A great ministry, but not a mission.

So, I stayed on the educational path another three years. It was great. I'm grateful, and I got a PhD. It sounds impressive, but I was still without much outreach training, which is called

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missiology—how to reach unbelievers effectively. Does that sound similar to your level of outreach training? Sadly, church people, even many pastors, would relate. What is the answer to this crippling dilemma, which leads to the spiritual decline of nations and disaster for our world? It describes the pain you may have about your unchurched children, grandchildren, coworkers, or neighbors.

What Are God's Great Objectives?

Would you like to spiritually *inspire* those you know who are not Christians? Could God use you to reshape the spiritual destiny of those you already know: your friends, relatives, neighbors, those at work or school—to know Jesus as Savior and Lord? Of course He could!

For me, my journey began as a pastor sent to a dying church in the inner city. My curse? Nothing I tried for effective outreach actually worked. It seemed impossible to reach our unchurched African American neighbors, who surrounded our all-Anglo church. My denominational leader in mission told me, “We close churches like that.” I wondered: “Was I called to be an undertaker for a congregation?”

As a Christian, would you believe that? Do you think it would be impossible for God to use *you* to reach those you know who don't know Jesus? Do you dare believe God is so weak He can only grow some churches? Is the Great Commission just for a few Christians? Who could ever believe that is in the character of God?

Let's Focus on Jesus

You know—and love—Jesus, or you wouldn't be reading this. And you know a lot about Jesus, or you wouldn't be committed to your church.

To be clear, it is not your pastor's fault. To be honest, for me, it was the system's fault. The denomination. They trained me to *maintain* a church, but not to grow a church. I had to go to another school to become a missionary to my own country, my own neighborhood. And I learned how to train the members of my congregation—and others—to become *missionaries*, without leaving home.

To look at the most basic issues, we examine what are perhaps the most powerful statements made by Jesus. Now, I get it: Everything Jesus teaches is important, necessary, and part of God's plan for every church. Yet, as a foundation, we begin this journey of mission with three powerful statements from Jesus. They are primary keys for effective mission to those in your social network, those who are not yet believers.

Jesus: Three Basic Themes

There are three basic commands of Jesus that, from a mission perspective, are primarily effective for outreach.

#1: “*Love one another*”: The Pharisees loved the law of God. They wanted to get it right. Their conflict with Jesus was about law(s) without grace; politics rather than relational influence; rules versus forgiveness; regulations versus mission. When the woman caught in the act of adultery was brought to Jesus, the crowd said: “Stone her!” Jesus demonstrated compassion, told her to “sin no more,” and reminded the crowd (and us): We all need His forgiveness!

#2: “Come follow me”: To be clear, most Christ-followers—even those in declining churches—are genuine followers of Jesus. They want to learn more. They listen to sermons. They read their Bibles. Many of them participate in Bible classes. They pray regularly. They worship Jesus.

#3: “Go, make disciples”: Technically, this is called *missiology*: How to reach new people for Jesus. To be clear, it is not just evangelism. Technically the word *evangelism* means good news. There are some Christians who have the spiritual gift of evangelist. I don't. Most people don't. My friend Frank has that gift. He can lead strangers to Christ.

However, all Christians have the role of witness. It's as simple as telling your own story about how you came to know Jesus as your personal Savior and how that impacts your whole life.

After decades of experience with helping churches, I am convinced that most declining churches suffer because: (1) their pastor was not trained to be a “missionary,” and (2) therefore, the pastor can't equip the staff and leaders to be “missionaries.” Worse yet, parents can't train their children to be “missionaries.” The result? Churches decline; secularism overtakes the nation; the Christian movement stalls and dies—until it is resurrected.

The discipline of missiology includes many facets. They can be taught and learned. Any Christian can be trained to be a missionary. Look, no one would send a “career” missionary to a foreign land without thorough training in missiology. In fact, when I graduated from seminary, a few of my classmates went on to become missionaries in foreign countries. What I didn't know? They had to be trained at schools designed to equip pastors to be missionaries. The implication? The mission field is only “over there” somewhere!

The good news? You can be trained in missiology. You can become a missionary to your own country and never leave home. Your church staff can learn the biblical dynamics of missiology. They could equip you and others in your church. (I know—I did this in my church.) That church, which had declined by 67 percent before I arrived, began to grow. More importantly, it remains a healthy, growing church several decades after I left. That church thrives in a challenging inner-city neighborhood. Missiology works! It can work for you and your church. You will contribute to the most important spiritual issue facing our nation today. Why? When people meet Jesus, it changes everything.

What Can You Do?

- Visit some churches in your area that are growing. Learn how they developed a mission-minded culture. Get past the “program stuff” and learn about the mission principles that are part of their spiritual DNA. Don't go alone. Take a group of those in your church who are spiritually hungry.
- Contract with a church consultant to come in and analyze your congregation. Ask for 10 to 12 key recommendations that would help your church move from maintenance to mission.
- Identify those in your church who are spiritually afflicted with “holy discontent” and are eager to do whatever it takes to see your congregation turn from decline to growth.
- Encourage those with holy discontent to read, study, and discuss the book *Who Broke My Church?* using the discussion guide.
- If there are those with holy discontent at a high level who also have a passion for learning and the discipline to read and study missiology in depth, invite them to read and discuss the book *The Dynamics of Christian Mission* by Paul Pierson.
- Identify those who have the gift of intercession. Ask them to form an ongoing group that focuses on prayer for unbelievers in your community to become receptive.
- Invite a specialist to help you identify and equip those in your church who will become spiritual entrepreneurs—who focus on mission in your community beyond the walls of your church.