

Clarifying Our Vision: The Most Important Thing

Matthew 22:34-40 Matthew 28:16-20

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I never wanted a tattoo. That doesn't mean I don't like tattoos or body art. I have liked some that I have seen. Others, not so much. That also does not mean I don't like people with tattoos. I do. My dad had a tattoo on his forearm that he got while in the army in World War II. It was a heart with a woman's name in the center. The woman's name? Mother. Smart guy, my dad.

My oldest son has two tattoos that he hid from me for several months. I still call him my son. I didn't disown him.

There was one time when I toyed with the notion of getting a tattoo. I would have had it applied to my bicep on my left arm. I wondered how much it would cost, but I never discussed it with anyone, not even my wife.

It would have included 9 letters pertinent to a subject I was very passionate about – rpqnx/dfx. The subject meant so much to me that I never wanted to forget. And then one day I gave in and this is what I did.



Okay. I didn't do it. Mark Gulden our communications director photoshopped this for me. By the way, my arms are actually that big! No they're not.

The letters are rpqnx/dfx. Here's what they stand for: reaching people with the Good News of Jesus, becoming fully-devoted followers of Christ. It describes the nature and function of the church. I am so passionate about the church and its purpose that I almost had it permanently tattooed on my body. It is permanently tattooed on my heart.

One day Jesus was asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus replied,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength.”

This is the first and greatest commandment. The second, said Jesus, is like it.

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself. These are the two greatest commandments. Upon these two commandments hangs all the law and the prophets.”

In other words, everything said and taught by Jesus, by the prophets, etc. is based on these two commandments.

Then after Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead, he appeared to his disciples on a mountaintop in Galilee. There Jesus gave them this charge:

Go and make disciple of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. Mt. 28:18-20

It's called The Great Commission.

If you consider these passages together, they teach us that;

- We are to love God more than anything else.
- We are to love our neighbors a lot, as much as we love ourselves.
- We are to make disciples, followers of Jesus. We are to lead people to Jesus.
- We are to teach them to obey the teachings of Jesus.

After I had been a pastor for 15 years, or so, I began to wrestle more and more with the nature and purpose of the church. I knew that the church was Jesus' idea, that it began on Pentecost (50 days after Easter) when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples like tongues of fire, and that the church was intended to provide for the continued growth and development of the Christian faith and the transformation of the weak. That faith was and continues to be that Jesus Christ, God's only son lived, taught and led by example, suffered and died for our sins, was raised from death to life on the third day and provides for our salvation.

After that, I became confused. Was the church's job to serve and satisfy its membership or was it to tell other people about Jesus or was it to meet the physical needs of others or was it to care for its facilities or was it to feed hungry people or was it to be financially responsible so as to provide for the long term existence of the building? Was it to reach out to others or keep unto itself and protect what it already has?

I began to read and study scripture and pray and listen for God: I went back to the Great Commandments and Great Commission. I considered these words, Love the Lord your God with all your heart.... I asked myself; What does it mean to love God? It means that we recognize and appreciate what God has done for us. He has given us life itself. He, God, has given us his Son, to die for our sin and to provide our salvation. God has given his Holy Spirit to live in us, to guide us and to draw us into him, and to always be with us.

So we embrace God's love for us and we love God in return. We express our love for God by trying to be obedient to God, by trying to do the things he wants us to do and, and by imitating the behavior and character of Jesus.

God wants us to love him above all else, to love those around us, to tell others about Jesus, to encourage them to become followers of Jesus and to teach them about Jesus so that we all may be more and more like Jesus.

I examined what other churches were doing and why. I noticed a surprising similarity in their purpose statements. Somewhere I could usually find words like "Reach people with the Good News of Jesus". Make fully-devoted followers of Christ.

rpqnx/dfx

That made sense. It just made sense. It was the Great Commandments and the Great Commission together.

Therefore, when I came here 11 years ago, I encouraged our leadership to reconsider our purpose and they agreed. So, the purpose of Ingomar Church is to reach people with the Good News of Jesus and together become fully devoted followers of Christ.

How do we do that? By being intentional and proactive.

Let me tell you what I have observed about churches during my 40 years of ministry. First of all, they are great places to worship and serve God, great places to meet Jesus, and to teach people about Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit, and they are full of wonderful people.

But sometimes they get stuck. Sometimes they forget why they exist. Sometimes they become self-centered and naval-gazing. Sometimes they get caught-up in what they, the individual members want, and lose track of what God wants for the church. Sometimes they try to do too much and sometimes they don't do enough. Sometimes someone does something that upsets someone else and they leave the church, they refuse to forgive and God's heart is grieved and Satan rejoices. That is not going to happen here!

Sometimes they want to keep the church the way it is, or the way it once was, or the way their church was when they were a child growing up, when God is trying to lead the church in a new direction to do even greater things.

Sometimes the church tries to do everything at the same time in hopes of satisfying everyone but which really satisfies no one. We must go where God is leading us.

About 5 or 6 years ago I listened closely to a presentation by Robert Schnage, a bishop in the United Methodist Church. Based on his observation and experience first as a pastor and then as a bishop, he said that there were 5 common characteristics that strong and highly effective churches had in common, 5 things they did really well. He called them the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. They were 5 practices of churches that bear fruit, churches that lead others to believe in and follow Jesus, churches that are getting it right.

Many of you have heard of them before. Some haven't. They are:

1. Radical hospitality – We are willing to go out of our way, do whatever it takes to help you feel welcomed, warm and wanted when you enter our church.
2. Passionate worship – worship that is so good, so engaging that you can't wait to get there on Sunday.

3. Intentional Faith Development – learning opportunities different from worship that help people to increase their knowledge, deepen their faith, and build relationships with others through small groups.
4. Risk-taking mission and service – responding to the needs of others beyond our comfort zone whether those needs be of a spiritual or physical nature, locally, beyond our community into all the world.
5. Extravagant generosity – generosity toward the church and the needs of others that recognizes first of all that all things, all things come from God. It's a generosity that is kind, considerate, unselfish, and reflects the extravagance of God's love for us.

So how are we doing? Good. And we're getting better but we aren't done yet. And we'll keep working at it because we are living into what God is calling our church to be.

But there is one thing that we must never forget. This one thing keeps coming back to me over and over again. This one thing is the most important thing and it has a name. It is Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the most important thing. I believe, we believe that next to being born, the most important thing that can happen in a person's life is that they would come to know who Jesus is, what he has done and that they would love Jesus for that, that they would accept what Jesus has done for them, and they would have a relationship with Jesus.

Next to being born, the most important thing that can happen to a person is that they would welcome Jesus into their life, that they would have a relationship with Jesus. The church makes that happen.

And we believe that life, all of life is better when Jesus is at the center of that life.

Our job as a church is to keep the most important thing as the most important thing. Jesus first! At Ingomar Church, we make life better for others and we do it, first and foremost, by helping them to find the handle on the door that leads to Jesus.

So we clarify our focus on the future of our church, we begin with Jesus. Jesus first and foremost. And I want to ask if you have acknowledged what Jesus has done for you and if you have accepted him as your savior. If you have already, that's awesome.

If you haven't, I'd like to give you the chance to do so. During this next instrumental moment, think about yourself and Jesus. And if you'd like to accept what he's done for you, pray this prayer to Jesus in the silence of your heart.

Lord Jesus, I am grateful for what you have done for me, for the gifts you have given me – your love, your sacrifice, forgiveness for my sin and salvation. I accept your gifts and I accept you. I wish to be a fully devoted follower of yours. Amen

If you prayed that prayer, tell someone. Put it on your connect card. Tell me. And, congratulations.