

The Fuel for Fulfilling the Great Commission in Unity = The Glory of God

Pastor Forney stated the theme of this meeting: "Brothers and Sisters in Unity to Fulfill the Great Commission." Just in case you are a bit fuzzy on the Great Commission, Jesus stated it clearly in Matt. 28:18-20, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Pastor Robert has already exhorted us on the basis of John 17:20-26. He reminded us that the realization of spiritual unity does not happen automatically. Just as a good marriage is built on hard work, so spiritual unity requires diligent attention. While he has emphasized the horizontal element, now I want to give some roots to this concept. Is there something deeper to which we must look in order to work together to fulfill the Great Commission?

So we want to see God's people uniting together to make disciples of all nations. Surely that is something that is pleasing to our Lord. The big question is: How do we do it? Many would say that we are too splintered to carry out the Great Commission effectively. Denominational barriers and doctrinal differences are too great; we just can't work together. Is there some way that we can be united in the work of disciple-making?

I must admit that I have forgotten almost as much history as I have learned, but when you live in this country, it is difficult to escape hearing stories about how World War II brought this nation together. Such an all-consuming war effort smashed all kinds of differences--whether social, cultural, economic, or political. The nation pulled together for a common cause. Building on that, we might conclude that a goal as great as making disciples of all nations ought to motivate us to get beyond our differences and work for the good of God's kingdom. Yet we don't often find that to be the case.

I. The Principle Exemplified

Is there something deeper to which we can look? Please allow me to direct your attention back to the day of Pentecost, less than two months after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Let's read it in Acts 2:1-11...

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. 2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. 5 And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. 6 And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. 7 Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? 8 "And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? 9 "Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 "Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 "Cretans and Arabs--we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God."

It wasn't a one-man show. It wasn't just Peter, nor was it only the apostles. No, they were all speaking the wonderful works of God (vs. 11). The approximately 120 believers were together speaking the Word with great effectiveness. Not only were 3,000 saved, but those three thousand continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers (2:42). What a powerful example of Christians uniting to carry out the Great Commission. That's what we long to see.

II. The Principle Explained

I want to build on what Pastor Robert said by going back a few days before Jesus' prayer, as recorded in John 17. The passage to which I want us to look is closely related to John 17. Please turn to our primary text, **John 12:23-28...**

But Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. 24 Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. 25 He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor. 27 Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. 28 'Father, glorify Your name.'"

Our calling is to make disciples of Jesus, the Christ. But why should people be willing learners, eager followers of this Jesus? Because He gave His life on the cross and rose from the grave. That is what He's talking about here in John 12:23ff. Notice how He begins, "The hour is come that the Son of man should be glorified." In light of the context that follows, that seems crazy. Surely when He speaks of the grain of wheat falling into the ground and daying, Jesus is speaking of His own death. But again in verse 28, "Father, *glorify* your name." What is all this talk about glory, when it is obvious that Jesus was surrendering Himself to death on the cross? That was His glory. Yes, He was going to the Father, where He would be reunited with Him in glory. Nevertheless, His death was His glory. How could it be? Because it was there that He fulfilled the will of His Father. He had no greater glory. As He had fulfilled the will of His Father through all eternity in heaven, now He fulfilled the Father's perfect will on earth. When Jesus said, "Father, glorify Your name," He knew that meant dying for my sins on that cross. That was glory for Him, because it brought glory to the Father.

What does that have to do with us? Verse 25, "He who loves his life shall lose it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it unto eternal life." So I lose my life in order that I may gain it, but this is not some selfish gain, some personal achievement. We lose our lives so that we may keep them *unto eternal life*. What is eternal life? Jesus defined it in chapter 17 -- "that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (17:3). John boiled it down even more in I John 1:1-3, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life-- 2 the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us-- 3 that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." Yes, Jesus Himself is eternal life.

To lose my life is to lose my life in Him, and when we lose our lives in Him, increasingly the glory of God consumes us. It is this passion for the Lord's glory that is the fuel for unity. It is this all-out longing to see the Father and the Lamb receive the glory they deserve that stirs Great-Commission living among the people of God. The longing for His glory smashes the pride and petty grievances that separate us. It is this glory focus that purifies in us the first-tier doctrines that unite us in Christ.

Let me be clear at this point. Brothers and sisters, we need a passion for the glory of God. If we want to get over ourselves, let us lose ourselves in His glory. As the hymn writer put it: "And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace." But all too often His glory and grace grow dim in the shadow of the things which so easily distract us.

We are conscious that Jesus prayed that we might be one. We believe that He indeed made us one through His death and resurrection, do we not? Surely the Father answered Jesus' prayer. I remind you that unity in Christ is not something we are working to achieve; all we who are in Christ are one in Christ. **Gal. 3:27-28**, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Not "you should be," but "you *are* all one in Christ Jesus." In Eph. 4:3, Paul did not admonish the Ephesian believers to achieve unity in Christ, but he urged them to guard the unity that was already theirs. Brothers and sisters, we are one in Christ. But what is it that will activate that unity in such a way that we can labor together for the good of His kingdom? Is it not this all-consuming passion for God's glory?

What is the focus of the Bible? It is Jesus, the Christ. And who is Jesus? He is the brightness of God's glory, and the express image of His person (Heb. 1:3). Have you ever seen how the glory of God dominates the Word of God? Even when His glory is not explicitly mentioned, it is never far from the surface. "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1). "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth, who hath set thy glory above the heavens" (Ps. 8:1). Do you remember Moses crying out from the depth of his soul, "Please show me Your glory" (Ex. 33:18). More than once we find the Psalmist proclaiming, "Give unto the Lord the glory due unto His name" (Ps. 29:2; 96:8). Listen to the heart cry of David: "O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You; My

flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land where there is no water. 2 So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, to see Your power and Your glory" (Ps. 63:1-2). Don't forget those words from the prophet Jeremiah: "Thus says the LORD: 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty man glory in his might, Nor let the rich man glory in his riches; 24 But let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I am the LORD...'" (Jer. 9:23-24a). Paul quoted Jeremiah in I Cor. 1:31, "He who glories, let him glory in the Lord."

Then we come to our Lord Jesus. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1-2,14). Hear Him again, as He considers the rapidly-approaching cross: "Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name" (John 12:27-28a). Then listen to how He begins His prayer to the Father in John 17:1,4-5...

Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You... 4 I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. 5 And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.

Is it any wonder that Paul writes, "But God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ"? (Gal. 6:14). "For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36). Should we not cry out with John in the Revelation: "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power"? (Rev. 4:11). Shall we not add our voices to the multiplied thousands in Rev. 5:12, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, And strength and honor and glory and blessing!""? Oh the truth of Rev. 15:4, "Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You..."

Come back to Pentecost. Why would Peter stand up and preach the gospel to a Jesus-killing crowd? Didn't he know it was dangerous? Yes, but he was motivated by the glory of God. Was his prayer not, "Father, glorify Thy name"? Was that not the heart of every believer in that upper room? And it wasn't just Peter preaching a sermon; they were all working together in unity for the glory of God, all speaking the wonderful works of God. When the glory of the Lord fell on that place, the focus was not upon a strategy. Nor were they asking if they had unity. When they were lost in His glory, the Spirit filled them and they made disciples.

If we focus on unity, the unity that prevails will largely be something that we manufacture. We will be careful that we say the right things, so that we won't offend anyone. In short, we will do nothing more than achieve manmade harmony. If we emphasize the Great Commission, strategies will rise to the surface. Strategies aren't necessarily bad, but they have a way of reverting back to the wisdom of men. But when we are mastered by the glory of God, we will increasingly join our hearts together in pursuit of making disciples. The focus won't be on unity, but that unity will be apparent as we glory in His glory. While the Great Commission will never be far from the surface, even it will be lost in the glory of God.

III. The Principle Illustrated

We have been blessed with eight grandkids. They are a joy to be around, but when it comes to getting all eight of them to pose for a picture... I can tell that some of you have been there! Talk about a lack of unity... They are looking in eight different directions. The one year old is having trouble fitting the photo session into her agenda. Some of the older ones are getting a bit bored, though they try not to show it. At least one has concluded that funny faces make a better picture. But let's suppose we could transport them to the rim of the Grand Canyon for this picture. I believe it would make all the difference in the world. Have you ever been at Grand Canyon for a sunset? When you are out there at one of those picture-perfect vistas and the sun gets down close to the horizon, there is a hushed stillness that comes over the scene. Why? Because everyone there is lost in the beauty of that breathtaking sunset. Though they don't all realize it, they are lost in the glory of God. And there is unity. Every eye is focused on that sunset.

I must confess that I love the beauty of God's creation, and it is hard to beat a Grand Canyon sunset. But brothers and sisters, that is nothing compared to the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, whose intensity is focused on the cross and the resurrection. That is glory!

Conclusion

I am aware that some of you are likely thinking or will think, "Well, that's a nice little sermon, but it doesn't really tell us how to unite with one another to fulfill the Great Commission." I admit that it isn't a quick fix. It doesn't provide a formula that can be evaluated in a few easy steps. But in reality, it is the desire for the quick fix and precise formula that distracts us from the glory of God. You say, "But we want something practical. We can't get hold of losing ourselves in the glory of God."

Please hear me. Why do we not lose ourselves in the glory of God? It is because we're too busy and we're too tall. When was the last time you shut everything down and got away to spend two or three uninterrupted hours with your Lord? We're too busy. When is the last time you knelt down or prostrated yourself on your face before Almighty God and cried out from the depth of your heart, "Father, glorify Your name in my life, no matter what the cost"? We're too tall. Brothers and sisters, we must resist the lure of the world, which tells us we can have what we desire with little or no cost. Jesus said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).

Please don't misunderstand. Ultimately, I am not saying that seeking the glory of God is the means to a great end--fulfilling the Great Commission as a unified body. No, the glory of God is never a means to a greater end; God's glory is the greatest end. The glory of God is the means, the end, and everything else. But let us never think we can effectively unite to make disciples apart from hearts that are aglow with His glory. If you want to be practical, then do this every day of your life: **Believe** the glory of God: **Practice** the glory of God; **Proclaim** the glory of God.

I close with a poem I love, written by Amy Carmichael...

Flame of God

Amy Carmichael

From prayer that asks that I may be
Sheltered from winds that beat on Thee,
From fearing when I should aspire,
From faltering when I should climb higher
From silken self, O Captain, free
Thy soldier who would follow Thee.

From subtle love of softening things,
From easy choices, weakenings,
(Not thus are spirits fortified,
Not this way went the Crucified)
From all that dims Thy Calvary
O Lamb of God, deliver me.

Give me the love that leads the way,
The faith that nothing can dismay,
The hope no disappointments tire,
The passion that will burn like fire;
Let me not sink to be a clod;
Make me Thy fuel, Flame of God.