

## **Value Driven: Jesus the Missionary**

Philippians 2:5-11

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Please open your Bibles to Philippians chapter 2 – page 831 in the pew Bible.

If you've been with us over the last month and a half, you know that we've been in a series called Value Driven where we've been looking at the new set of Values our church has written for ourselves. You'll find this document on the back of the white community prayer insert in the bulletin, and if you could take that out and follow along that would be great.

Today in Philippians 2, which is a text we've referenced several times in this series, I want to highlight the role that missionaries play when they embark on the world of cross-cultural mission.

Imagine a scenario. A missionary from Canada travels to the African country of Botswana and moves in with a tribe of indigenous people there. At first he has nothing in common with his neighbours. He's white, they are black. He speaks English they speak Bantu. He wears a white shirt and cargo pants, they don't. And he has the job of introducing them to the joy that comes from living your life for the glory of God.

If he is going to be successful there is a few things he has to do. He can't start by telling the people they need to learn English, wear white shirts and build a church like the one he left back home. Instead, as much as possible, he needs to become like them.

And so he learns to speak Bantu, and learns their customs. He finds out that some gestures that mean friendly things back in home are offensive in Botswana and so he stops doing those things. He eats their food and celebrates their holidays.

And he does all this because Jesus employed the same tactic 2000 years ago. And by emulating Jesus he hopes he will get to see these people come to give glory God. Let's see how Jesus accomplished this in Philippians 2 starting in verse 5.

[Read Philippians 2:5-11]

Now this is a familiar text. But come at it today from the perspective of Jesus the missionary.

Jesus starts out completely unlike the people He wants to save. But instead of holding onto the rights of His identity that made Him distinct from us, He made Himself nothing in comparison to what He was. He gave up His divine "dress" to be clothed in human nature and serve us as one of us.

This is Jesus the cross-cultural missionary. Now His goal was always that we become like Him, but He didn't start by demanding that us sinners change. Instead He changed to be like us. He learned our language, and ate our food all in order to make sure that He could convey His message in a way we could understand. So Hebrews says:

For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet He did not sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

Hold on to the idea of Jesus the cross-cultural missionary, and let's return to our Value Driven series one last time.

Originally last week was going to be the final episode in this series, but I received some well thought through concerns from a few members of our church. And when I spoke with the deacons about them they understood where these concerns were coming from, so I need to clarifying what I've said.

As an aside I want to thank those of you who came to me with your concerns. Conversations like these confirm for me how committed to God's word our church is, and how supportive of Nikki and I you are as well. It's not an easy thing to put together a constructive, and conversation-starting, group of questions and concerns. And I'm always impressed and encouraged when people take the time to do that. So thank you to those of you who approached me this last week.

The primary concerns came from the demographics chart I presented, and a comment I made that I would like to revisit a little more carefully this week.

But just before I get there I want to reiterate why it is that we've done this series, and why we want to be a Value Driven church. Many churches are full of good people who want to honour God, but don't know how to do that, and so end up simply worshipping together on Sundays and maybe joining a Bible study during the week. And while these things are good, these churches don't accomplish much for the increase of God's glory – they don't make a difference in the city.

And at Fort George we don't want to be that kind of church. We recognize that the increase of God's glory is why we exist. And we know God's glory is increased when people who are far from Him are transformed by His grace. This is the miracle God gives Himself to accomplishing. And we want to be part of Him transforming our city like this. Amen?

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Now our church has a long history with this kind of attitude. As I mentioned a few weeks back our story in this city stretches back over 100 years to a group of godly German immigrants that God used to expand His kingdom here. Out of people connected with that church came the First Baptist Church and the Evangelical Free Church. And then in the 1950's, in recognition that Prince George was predominantly an English speaking community, they planted our church as their English Sunday School ministry.

And so the passion to be part of what God is doing in the city is deep in our DNA. And that DNA drove us to think innovatively about how we could invest the talents God had given us for His glory. Out of this came a weekly radio program and then a T.V. ministry which utilized cutting edge technology to connect with our neighbours. And God blessed us by letting us watch Him work through our church. In the 1970's Fort George was bursting at the seams with people who had been transformed by the gospel. And so we poured our energy into planting two other churches in the city – first College Heights Baptist Church and then Hartland Baptist Church.

I think you would all agree that in the almost 60 years that our church has been around we've been blessed to be part of some very exciting things that God has been doing.

And we are a church that believes God is still at work in this city. And we've celebrated with other churches who've gotten to participate with this and grown recently. But here is where the challenge lies for us today. While our church's partnership with the increase of God's kingdom peaked in the late 70's, over the last 35 years or so our creative and innovative participation has diminished.

And as a result, instead of continuing to grow and reproduce ourselves we've entered a "maintenance and decline" stage. Now this isn't to say God isn't working in our lives right now. I know lots of your stories and I praise God for how He has used us to increase His kingdom. As I look out today, as every Sunday, I see people who have given their lives to faithfully following Christ and seeking to be part of what He is doing, and I honour that – thank you for imaging Christ to me and to those around you. As a church however, we have not had the kind of opportunities we had in the 70's.

And the demographics of our church give evidence to this reality. So this is the chart I presented last week. There are roughly 120 adults who attend our church. Now obviously all 120 of us don't attend every Sunday. In fact average attendance is around 80 adults. But 120 adults are connected with our church enough to have their names in our directory. And of those 120 adults 50% are 70 years old or above.

If this doesn't change, what this means is that within the next 10 years or so our church will close.

Now it is important to note that it isn't always a bad thing for a church to close. Our church is not God's kingdom. If we close God will not have a bad day and slap His head wondering what He is going to do. His kingdom just isn't that fragile!

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But statistically most churches have a life expectancy of 70 years. At the earliest stage they are birthed in a dream and then grow as they push towards their ministry goals. Once they reach these goals they have a brief plateau phase and then begin to shrink. Most churches die around the time that the generation that planted them dies.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2002/12/can-dying-churches-be-resuscitated.html> (Accessed February 25, 2017)

But it doesn't have to happen this way. Instead of dying some churches re-enter the dream and vision stage and then go through the cycle again. But every church that does this has to change the way they've done things.

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Now last week I made a statement linked to this that hit several of you in a way that I didn't intend. We were looking at the connection between the glory of God and our value to put others first. And we said that putting others first requires reaching out to those who are different from us. And then, while talking about the friendliness of our church, I sought to paint a picture about the way our church is perceived by people who enter it for the first time. And I said:

If you are someone who is a lot like us – if you are 70 years old and have a German or immigrant background – then we are a welcoming and accepting church. But if you are different from us there is a high likelihood that you will not experience our church as friendly. And you will probably not come back.

Now something I didn't mean to say with this statement is that if you personally happen to be 70 years old and have a German or immigrant background then the problem our church finds itself in is your fault – you aren't friendly. This is absolutely not true, and it was never my intention to convey this. If you heard me say that, I am very sorry.

The truth is over the last 6 years I've been incredibly blessed by many of you and your generosity and friendliness to our family. Nikki and I are often blown away by people here. You love us, and you look like Jesus. Thank you for imaging Christ to us. While we came here deciding to love you, over the last several years we've fallen in love with this family. And church let's keep this up – let's keep looking like Jesus to each other.

But my point was that while our church is very friendly to those on the inside, we are not perceived as friendly by those who are on the outside and who are not similar to us. And the evidence for this is that we simply are not connecting with people who are 20 and 30 and 40 years old.

Now this isn't your fault if you are 70, this is a problem we all own together. And it is a problem we all seek to find an answer to. All of us want to find a way to be part of what God is doing in the city again. We want our neighbours to encounter the joy we've found in Christ; we want our family to return to faith. And we would be incredibly blessed if we had the opportunity to participate in this miracle. Right?

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In an effort to communicate more clearly than I did last week let me paint you a picture of what the deacons and I have seen happen at our church: Imagine there were two women in our city who were starting to be hungry for spiritual things and, while neither of them had a church home, both showed up here one Sunday morning. One of them was a nice-blouse wearing 70-year-old, and the other was a designer ripped-jean wearing, boyfriend living with, Starbucks coffee carrying 20 years old.

Now imagine with me how each of these women would perceive our church. Both would be greeted at the door, both would be given a bulletin. Both would be smiled at or even hand-shaked by a few people in the church. But at this point the similarities between the two experiences would likely end.

As the two ladies sit down in the sanctuary one would find herself surrounded by a bunch of people who were like her. When she would be greeted she would be recognized as new, but she wouldn't feel out of place like she stood out like a sore thumb. After a couple weeks some people would likely invite her out for lunch. And then, even if she wasn't all that outgoing, within a month she would be invited to a Bible study and very quickly make a bunch of friends here.

Now I don't want to embarrass anyone, but imagine I asked right now for a show of hands of everyone who had started coming to our church within the last five or six years and who had a story similar in some way to this first ladies story – you found yourself surrounded by people who made you feel comfortable and welcome here. How many hands would be raised?

There would be several. In fact I would wager that everyone who has made this their church home over the last little while has had an experience like this.

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But the story of the second lady is a little different. When she arrives she recognizes right away that she doesn't look like everyone else. Feeling self-conscious she notices when people eye her jeans, and she is the only person in the sanctuary with a coffee. Nobody says anything about this, but she knows she stands out. And so instead of looking at people invitingly she pulls her phone and checks her email. People notice she is busy and give her space. Then after a few minutes she notices someone praying by themselves and decides that's a good way to hide, and so bows her head. People see that and give her even more space.

And as this happens, while we mean to greet her, we are also relieved at not having to because really we don't know what to say. After all she is so very different from us.

At the end of the service she makes a quick exit and doesn't come back.

Now both these ladies were treated largely the same way by us, but their experiences with our church are very different. And that isn't because we are unfriendly – we aren't – but we are perceived differently by different people.

And brothers and sisters, over the last six years I have watched us do this to dozens of 20 to 40-year-olds who have visited our church and left simply because the culture here is so different from what they are used to that they feel totally out of place.

Now this isn't anyone's fault. It certainly isn't your fault that you're 70 or come from a certain background. It is together as a church that we face this. We find ourselves living in a world that has changed dramatically.

Today we live in an open source age full of trending retweets, Instagrams and Snapchats. If you want a voice you have to do it Gangnam-style. Forget sexting, let's Netflix and chill with our venti half-caf vanilla latte with an extra shot. Don't be a helicopter parent, just Google it or like it or share it or tweet it. Have you got your sleeve tat yet? I'm a foodie going green, with a 100-mile diet. Aren't you?

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How much of that made sense? The reality is the world we live in today isn't the same one it was 50 years ago. While we all call it Prince George, we don't speak the same language. Now truth be told I don't know half of what I just said – I'm almost 40 years old and that means I could be "dad" to most of the kids in our youth group – I'm old. And connecting cross generationally today is harder than it's ever been.

And this isn't just a church problem. Yesterday on the CBC app there was an article titled "Want Millennial Voters? Conservatives hear research on why their message isn't resonating." Everyone 36 years and older is having a difficult time connecting with young people today. For anyone who doesn't know a Millennial is someone who is between the age of 16 and 36 today.

So everyone in North America is facing this communication problem, but the question for us Christ-followers is are we allowed to blame the Millennials for our difficulty in communicating with them? When I want to introduce them to Christ, who has the onus of responsibility to speak in a way that the other understands? Who needs to change if God's kingdom is going to expand and His glory increase, me or them?

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There are two responses to this. The first is "people who come to Christ must change." The Scriptures say everyone who comes to Christ is transformed, and the church is not supposed to get soft on its message to get people in. So in this sense 20 and 30 and 40-year-olds who come to church should expect to hear the message:

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12:2a)

But the problem with this is that it is impossible to look like Jesus until His Spirit is inside you. Prior to that we can pretend to be a Christ follower – we can wear the right clothes and learn the right songs, but we can't image Christ – we can't love the increase of God's glory. And so to ask people outside the church to image Christ if they want to be part of our group is an impossible thing to ask.

In fact that passage in Romans 12 isn't talking to non-Christians, it is talking to Christians. Verse 1 starts "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice." It isn't non-Christians who have their minds renewed, it is Christ-followers who receive this opportunity.

And so in contrast, the second response to the question “who should change?” is that when Jesus found Himself looking at a bunch of people who were nothing like Him He decided that He would change – Jesus changed! Now He didn’t change His message – He didn’t compromise – but He changed everything else about Himself. He let go of His divinity and the glory of heaven to become a man. And then, looking like a servant, He gave up His life to present us with His message. This is how much Jesus changed in order to reach a bunch of broken people with God’s grace.

And it wasn’t just Jesus who did this, the Apostles did the same. Paul, for example, knew that if the church was going to grow he had to reach to people who weren’t like him so he said:

I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:22-23)

The obvious implication then is that the responsibility rests on us if we are going to connect with our young neighbours. It is us who have to figure out how to speak their language. And if the methods we have been trying haven’t worked then the responsibility is on us – not them – to change.

Friends, the reality is we don’t have to travel to Batswana to do cross-cultural mission, Batswana has come to us. And so we need to change if we are going to be God’s messengers of grace in our city. If we don’t learn the language of those outside these walls then our neighbours and even our own children and grandchildren will not hear the gospel, and they will miss out on life with Christ like we have known.

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One website I found gave a few statistics: “59% of Millennials raised in a church have dropped out. 35 percent of these Millennials have an anti-church stance, believing the church does more harm than good. And Millennials are the least likely age group of anyone to attend church.”<sup>2</sup> Now these are American stats, it’s worse here. The fact is the North American church as a whole has failed to make Jesus relevant to the next generation, and our church is just one example of where this has happened.

So what are we to do? What is it that this new generation connects with that we could consider in our attempt to present the gospel of Jesus to them?

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Up front I don’t think we all need to rush out and buy \$100 jeans to wear next Sunday – though if you feel God calling you to do this give it a try. At least you might feel how out of place many people who come in these doors feel. But the fact is simply changing our clothes isn’t the answer. But there are at least three things we can do.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://faithit.com/12-reasons-millennials-over-church-sam-eaton/>

If we are going to become a relevant force for Christ in the city again we need to become aware of the problem that the church of North America and our own church is facing. We have lost our ability to connect with the people of our city in a way that is meaningful to them, and the onus is on us to change. We are the missionaries God has placed in this city, and so we are the ones who have been tasked with the great commission to go into our world and preach the gospel, like Jesus did, in a way people can connect with. We need to recognize the problem.

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Second, if we are going to change and become an effective missionary force in the city it will happen because of prayer. God is the one who changes hearts, and we need Him to change the heart of our church so that our desire to reach the community outside our walls is greater than our desire to be comfortable. The church of Canada needs this miracle, and we need this miracle.

So brothers and sisters, I plead with you to join me in praying for this. Those of you who have seen God move in the past – you’ve seen God draw people to Himself through things you’ve been blessed to be part of – please pray that God gives us another opportunity to see Him move again.

Pray like this because whenever people pray for God to change them for the increase of His glory, He answers. So pray expecting God to do something unexpected here.

And finally, after making ourselves aware of the problem we are facing, and praying for God to work in us, we need to prepare ourselves to try some out-of-the-box solutions. When Jesus let go of the rights of His divinity to become like us He was doing something that had never been done before. And likewise when the disciples headed out to start the church they did many things that had never been done before. Faith means stepping into the unknown with the confidence that God is moving and the desire to risk everything for the opportunity to partner with Him. The one thing we can’t keep doing is the same thing we’ve tried before – at least not if we expect different results.

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Brothers and sisters, we are a Value Driven church. So please pray that God will allow us to participate in what He is doing to reach the city of today. And then prepare yourself to take some significant risks that we’ve never taken before. We need to find ways to use our budget to bless Prince George. We need to find ways to use our building 7 days a week. We need to find ways to love the neighbours Jesus has placed beside us in a way they will understand. Friends, we need to be cross-cultural missionaries like Jesus was. And the good news is that He has given us His Spirit to empower us to succeed.