
Recovering a Vision for Kingdom Transformation

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Unity of Vision

In a particularly gripping scene in Mel Gibson's powerful film *The Passion of the Christ*, we see Jesus being aided by his mother after stumbling as he struggles to carry his cross up the Via Delarosa. As Mary looks into her son's blood stained face, Jesus says with an aura of victory, "Look mother, see how I make everything new."

These words are indeed found on the lips of Jesus, not in the Gospel accounts of the passion, but in Revelation 21: 3-5:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "*I am making everything new!*" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Many of us in the international ministry community long for unity. Yet unity requires a common vision—and a common vision is precisely what we lack. Many in the missions community are driven by a vision of spreading the gospel and planting churches in the last unreached pockets of the globe. Many Christian relief and development workers are motivated by a vision of aiding poverty-stricken communities through various projects aimed at meeting basic human needs.

It is my belief that these visions are laudable, but incomplete. What ought to be our vision? Read Revelation 21:3-5 again. Here is the answer in a word: Transformation. A vision of a world made new. Of "no more death, mourning, crying or pain." Of no more disease, corruption, hunger, poverty, injustice or war. A vision of completely and utterly transformed individuals, families, communities, and nations. Surely this is the vision for which Jesus lived, labored, suffered and died, and which He entrusted to His disciples

and the church. In fact, evangelizing, planting churches, and doing projects to help the poor are all means to this greater end, and here is where a central problem lies. People tend to accomplish what they set out to accomplish. If our goals are limited to planting churches or implementing development projects, we can do that—but we are in real danger of not pressing on towards the ultimate goal of transformation.

Some will undoubtedly argue that such transformation will only come on the other side of Christ's return. Until then, things will only go from bad to worse. There is truth in this. Paul starkly warned Timothy, "there will be terrible times in the last days" (2 Ti. 3:1-9). But is this the whole picture? No! Jesus overcame Satan on the cross. He appeared to His disciples before his ascension as a victorious King—the supreme authority of heaven and earth. He taught them, and us, to pray for His Kingdom to come on earth—now—as it is in heaven. In the words of J.I. Packer, "The Kingdom of God is present in its beginnings though future in its fullness; in one sense it is already here, but in the richest sense it is still to come." Francis Schaeffer put it this way: "Christians who believe the Bible are not simply called to say that 'one day' there will be healing, but that by God's grace, upon the basis of the work of Christ, substantial healing can be a reality here and now." The word "substantial" is key. Not full or complete healing, but real and substantial. This must be our vision. For real, substantial healing in every life, family, community and nation here and now, and full, complete healing when Christ returns.

Do we long for unity within the church and within the mission community? Unity requires common vision. Scripture provides us with a common vision. A definite goal to work for, live for and die for. We must lift our eyes to a farther horizon. One that goes beyond evangelizing, planting churches and doing relief and development projects. A vision that understands these to be means, and not ends. Our vision must be Jesus' grand vision of global transformation. His vision of the world, and everything in it turned right side up through Christ's shed blood on the cross.

An Inside-Out Process

Our vision determines our purpose. If we have unity of vision, we can share unity of purpose as well. As Christians, our purpose is to advance God's Kingdom on earth, here and now, as it presently exists in heaven. It's to see the truth; beauty and goodness of Jesus replace the lies, ugliness and evil in this world—in every heart, family, community, and sphere of society.

This revolution happens from the inside out. It begins inside human hearts and minds, transformed through faith in the living Christ. Someone once said, "God's law must be written on the individual's heart, then later on the stone tables of the institutions of society." If this is true, then our primary means of advancing the Kingdom is by proclaiming the Gospel in word and deed. Transformed people then transform the

world—beginning with their families. Transformed husbands and wives raise godly offspring, and such children will truly shape the future.

As transformed families band together, they form communities called local churches, and local churches are the Holy Spirit-powered engines that drive Kingdom advancement. Not just any church however. Kingdom-advancing churches are ones that congregate to worship, pray, learn from the teaching of the Word, receive the sacraments, and meet each other's needs. Then, having been equipped for works of service, they disperse into the community where they proclaim the Gospel, minister to the poor, and bring truth, beauty and goodness into every sphere of society by means of their vocations.

The Root Problem

Why do we see nations that have been evangelized still trapped in a web of poverty, corruption, violence and brokenness? In evaluating the results of the global missionary enterprise over the past 200 years, we are forced to conclude that saved souls and transformed hearts are essential—but not adequate—for true Kingdom transformation. Minds must be transformed as well.

This is a fundamental truth that has been neglected by both those in mission and relief and development communities alike. For the Kingdom to advance—for true transformation to occur—we must get to the root of the problem. Yet roots, by their very nature, are below the surface and thus often neglected. What is at our innermost core? It is our mind—our ideas, beliefs, and assumptions. These “roots” drive our emotions, feelings and values, which in turn shape our decisions and choices, and these determine the kind of lives we will lead. They also shape the kinds of societies we will live in.

For nations to be transformed, churches must be transformed. For churches to be transformed, families and individuals must be transformed—and this transformation must go all the way to the root. Human brokenness and misery then, is not only rooted in lost souls, but equally in darkened minds. Dallas Willard describes the problem this way:

Christian spiritual formation is inescapably a matter of recognizing *in ourselves* the idea system (or systems) of evil that governs the present age and the respective culture (or various cultures) that constitute life *away from God*. The needed transformation is very largely a matter of replacing in ourselves those idea systems of evil (and their corresponding cultures) with the idea system that Jesus Christ embodied and taught and with a culture of the Kingdom of God. This is truly a passage from darkness to light.

This brings us to the topic of worldview. Worldview is simply another word for the “idea systems” spoken of by Dallas Willard. Our worldview—and we all have one—is the sum total of all the assumptions that we hold about life which forms our view of reality. These assumptions are so pervasive and essential to how we think and how we approach life that we often do not even know they are there or understand when and how they are at work. They form within us from earliest childhood from the teachings, expectations and behaviors from family and community members. Humans are social beings. We develop our mindsets—our way of seeing the world—from our culture. We tend to think what our culture thinks and value what our culture values. This is part of what it means to be human.

The Solution

However, when we accept Christ as Savior, our mindsets need to be renewed. The word “repent”—from the Greek word *metanoeo*—literally means to change one’s mind. Repentance results in seeing the world the way God created it, then living within that framework. Those who are saved must put on the mind of Christ. They must repent from the “hollow and deceptive philosophies of this world, which depend on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Col. 2:8). They must “no longer be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of [the] mind” (Rom. 12:2). They must “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Co. 10:5). It is important that we understand that this means more than simply assenting to certain key biblical doctrines. It means seeing the world and everything in it in a whole new light, and then living accordingly.

The error of the relief and development community is in not digging deep enough, and not getting to the root of the problem. Does the community lack clean water? Let’s do a water project. Do people lack an adequate, balanced diet? Let’s do an agriculture project. And if we are Christians, then let’s do these projects “in the name of Christ” and hand out Gospel tracts on the weekends. But what if the lack of clean water or food is the result of poor choices, which in turn, are rooted in false, destructive beliefs? Then clearly these projects will have little or no impact.

The error of the mission’s community is quite similar. Evangelizing and planting churches is essential to, but not adequate for Kingdom transformation. They are means to an end—not ends in themselves. New believers, unless they are carefully disciplined down to the level of their mindset, or nations, at the level of culture, will continue to be trapped in many of the false, destructive beliefs they had before coming to Christ. Being converted doesn’t automatically entail a complete shift in beliefs. The transformation of the mind is a lifelong process that is central to sanctification, and sanctification is central to Kingdom advancement. Here is precisely where many missionary efforts have failed. Too often, their vision ends with numbers of conversions, numbers of churches planted, or the size of church growth. When this is the case, there is little motivation for

discipleship. There is little or no vision to see these precious new churches operate as engines of Kingdom transformation. Many missionaries either don't care that these things happen, assume someone else will do it, or that somehow it will happen automatically.

A Case Study in Transformation

The following is a true story.

The Pokomchi Indians are among the poorest people in the poorest state of Guatemala. A generation ago, missionaries came to evangelize and plant churches. Many Pokomchi accepted Christ, but their communities remained desperately poor. The young Christian converts gained hope for the future, but no hope for today. In fact, they were literally waiting to die, so they could leave their miserable existence on earth and go to be with Jesus in heaven. After awhile, several relief and development organizations came to work with the Pokomchi, interested in helping them overcome their physical poverty. They brought in large amounts of outside money and completed many projects, labeling them successful. Now, there were latrines, but they were largely unused. There were school buildings, but very few children attended or graduated. Many of the projects intended to improve the physical condition of the Pokomchi were completed, but there was no transformation in the lives and communities of the Pokomchi. The people remained desperately poor.

This began to change when Arturo, a young Peruvian pastor, began to work among the Pokomchi in the early 1990s. Unlike earlier missionaries and relief and development workers, Arturo understood the importance of the biblical worldview for individual and community transformation. Likewise, he understood that authentic Christian ministry is to be wholistic—reaching out to every area of brokenness in the community. He began to work with illiterate Pokomchi pastors. He prayerfully took them through a comprehensive study of the Bible, in hopes of challenging their mindsets. Arturo understood that true repentance involves more than spiritual belief. It also requires a completely transformed frame of mind.

As Arturo taught them from the Bible, he used everyday illustrations to teach concepts, like God's intention that mankind exercise stewardship over creation. A common problem among the Pokomchi was the lack of proper storage facilities for harvested crops. Often, peasant farmers harvested a good crop, only to have rats eat it before their children could be fed. Arturo asked the farmers, "Who is smarter, you or the rats?" The farmers would laugh and say, "The rats." Arturo asked, "Do you have dominion over the rats, or do the rats have dominion over your lives?" The farmers reluctantly acknowledged that, in a real sense, the rats had dominion over them and their families. Then, Arturo pointed out the truth contained in the Bible—that men and women were given dominion over creation. He pointed out that God had blessed them with creativity

because they were made in His image. With their God-given creativity and a proper understanding of their role to subdue and care for creation, they could overcome this problem.

Gradually, the mindsets of these Pokomchi pastors were transformed. As their mindsets were transformed, the church was impacted. Through the church, the community began to be transformed. Children started to go to school because the people valued education, particularly education in God's Word. Women learned to read because they understood that God cares equally for men and women. Men began to try new farming techniques because they wanted to be good stewards of what God provided. Women built stoves in their homes so their children would not fall into open cooking fires and get burned. Women also began to create small pantries to keep insects and vermin out of their food supplies because they understood their responsibility to exercise stewardship and provide for their communities.

A seminary professor from the United States visited Arturo. He witnessed how the lives of the Pokomchi had been transformed and tears welled up in his eyes as he said, "This is the coming of the Kingdom of God to the Pokomchi!"

The Pokomchi communities in this story are representative of millions of communities all over the world. Churches exist, but are making little or no transformational impact. The same can be said for relief and development projects. Hopelessness, fatalism, poverty and despair still reign. Yet here we see a spark of real transformation! What can we learn from this story?

What Was Needed?

In this case, the agent of transformation was not a project, but a person. Not just any person, Arturo was a pastor whose life had been radically transformed by an understanding of the importance of worldview and the power of the Biblical worldview. Arturo had the right vision. As for the earlier missionaries, they had come and gone. Churches were planted. Mission accomplished. Check it off the list and on to the next frontier. The same can be said for the relief and development workers. Projects completed. Photos taken. Check it off the list and on to the next community. But Arturo was looking for something far beyond churches or projects. He was looking for transformation. It hadn't happened yet. There was still much to be done.

The comprehensive transformation that Arturo envisioned required a comprehensive response—or as some might say—a *wholistic* response. The "whole" is transformed lives leading to a transformed community. The "parts" are spiritual, physical, social and mental needs being addressed in a seamless, integrated manner. Arturo's vision demanded a wholistic response. Simply addressing one of these needs while neglecting the others would not get the job done.

Furthermore, Arturo was trained to think “worldviewishly.” He correctly recognized that the root problem was not a lack of resources, or even lack of churches (which already existed), it was the beliefs; assumptions and ideas held by the Pokomchi themselves. Or more accurately, false, destructive ideas and beliefs that were still intact and operating.

For Arturo to recognize these problems took time. Short-term missions wouldn’t suffice. It required him to deeply acquaint himself with the community; its history, beliefs, and values. This necessitated him living within the community—becoming part of it. This is what it means to work “incarnationally.”

Arturo relied on the whole council of God’s Word, both its breadth and depth. The breadth comprises the flow of Biblical history: Creation - Fall - Redemption - Consummation. The depth is the Biblical worldview, the basis and standard for Kingdom Culture of truth, beauty and goodness. With these firmly in mind, he was able to evaluate local beliefs and values and determine which ones were true and wholesome and which false and destructive. He was then able to effectively counter false beliefs with the truth. This was done in the context of informal and formal teaching using local illustrations. Yet for the truth to bear its fruit, the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit was required. At the deepest level, transformation is only possible through the direct power of the Holy Spirit translating, convicting, opening eyes, and empowering people to change their beliefs, values and behaviors. It is a work of grace. Genuine Kingdom transformation is always done by God’s power and for His glory.

Arturo built on the foundation that already existed. He started with the Christians in the community—the church pastors and leaders—because he correctly understood that the church is the key engine of Kingdom transformation. If a church hadn’t existed in this community, then Arturo would have needed to work towards planting one as an essential first step. Arturo first challenged the Christians to live out these beliefs in the context of their families. Husbands needed to see their wives in a new way. Parents needed to see their children in the light of God’s revealed truth. Families are the most basic of social units. If Kingdom transformation can happen within families—then it can spread to the entire community and beyond. That is exactly what happened in the Pokomchi community.

Equally instructive is to consider what wasn’t needed for transformation in the Pokomchi communities. It happened without large infusions of money, outside resources or technical knowledge. With the exception of Arturo, all the resources needed were already in place—eyes simply needed to be opened to seeing them. This is not to say that money; resources and technical knowledge are bad, just that we must be careful not to put our hope in them, and they must be introduced only if appropriate and then with great care.

Conclusion

Can this case study be replicated? Yes! In fact it must be. Our hurting broken world is crying out for transformation. Here we find real hope and vision for the broken nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America as well as for the confused, lost nations of the developed west. What is required? God's vision combined with a clear understanding of the root problem and the inside-out process of Kingdom transformation.

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