



Focusing on the Mission

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Acts 1:21-26

Why are we here? What are we about? What is the point behind what we do as Christians and as a church? How do the mission and priorities of Christ Jesus change what and how we do what we do? How does it impact who we are?

Six weeks out from Jesus' resurrection, the disciples were doing a lot of soul-searching. They were working on making sense of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ministry among them. They were doing the difficult work of piecing their lives back together. They were looking toward how they needed to move ahead in preparation for the ministry, mission, and call set before them.

It was not an easy task. There were many issues through which they had to struggle. There were questions of leadership. There were issues of grief in Jesus' abrupt departure from their midst. There were concerns over how they could or should move forward. Who would call the shots? Who would define what should and should not occur? How would decisions be made? What issues should demand their greatest attention, energy, and investment? How would they refocus their lives individually and corporately in the absence of Jesus? What would they do with Jesus and his ministry in his absence?

Hanging over them was still the issue of Judas, who had died after betraying Jesus. Luke's account of Judas' death is different from that in the gospels, but however it had occurred, Judas' death had an impact on the lives of the others. They were no longer twelve. Were there others to step forward who had also consistently followed Jesus and could serve as witnesses to Jesus' teachings and actions, thus helping point the way for the rest?

There was plenty of turmoil in the ranks of believers after Jesus' death. There were questions over the very meaning and importance of Jesus' ministry. What should they do now? Jesus had not left them an organizational structure. Jesus had not left a written will, an organizational chart, a constitution and bylaws, strategy documents, a procedure manual, or even a short term set of action plans. There was uncertainty of what to do. There was concern over the future. There was doubt over charting a course or even defining identity. What would happen as a result of Jesus' ministry was a very open question. There were a lot of issues left undefined.

Then again, Jesus' focus had not been organizational. Jesus' ministry had not focused on the life of an institution. The focus had been on relationship, on treating one another, on trusting God and becoming agents of God's good will and blessing. Jesus' ministry had been organic. It had focused on community. It had focused on becoming a people, not building a structure. It had focused on daily living, not legalities, rules, procedures, and policies. Even so, the disciples were left now without the structure that Jesus' presence had constructed.

Jesus himself had been the organization and structure of the movement he had initiated. It was Jesus who had given cohesion, direction, and focus to the lives of the disciples gathered around him. Now they were struggling to move forward without reliance on his visible presence. They could no longer count on audible and tangible directions and answers to their questions and concerns. They found themselves forced to internalize Jesus' teachings and embody the principles of his ministry.

They would have to develop their own strategies and structures. They would have to struggle to define parameters that would keep Jesus' identity and character at the head of their corporate and

communal lives. They needed a way to center their actions and decisions, parameters which would steer and guide them into the unknown and point the same way Jesus had been pointing them over the last three years.

One issue rose as central above all others. They must be assured of an authoritative way to keep Jesus' words and deeds central in all their living. They needed to determine how to guarantee Jesus' direction would be the direction they would continue to follow. They recognized that each individual would likely have a different understanding of Jesus' life and ministry. They determined a need to set forth another individual alongside the eleven remaining disciples. Together, they would act as a control to verify what Jesus had truly said and done in their midst. They determined a need to have a witness to Jesus' ministry who had participated from early on at Jesus' baptism, all the way through the resurrection. He would join the others, not in directing the believers or in taking control of a fledgling organization. Rather, he would serve as an authority on Jesus. He would be a primary witness with the other eleven.

They needed another witness. After all, that was the primary task Jesus had left for them. "You will be my witnesses," he had said.

The concern was not organization, power, control, or leadership in the normal sense of the word. It was with authenticating witness to Jesus. Jesus was the center point of their identity as individuals and as a community of disciples. They were not focused on organizing principles, charts, structures, or plans drafted for an organization. Rather, they were focused on the mission Jesus had left for them.

It was the mission that would give structure to the body. It was the mission that would organize their actions, decisions, and priorities. They set themselves aside in order to make the mission Jesus had left them become their organizing principle, their purpose.

The mission even structured how they went about choosing a replacement for Judas. It was a time-honored way of doing things. They brought two names forward, individuals who fulfilled the basic criteria for witnesses to Jesus' life, ministry, and teaching. Then they took themselves out of the picture. They cast lots, praying that God would take control of the outcome and determine which of the candidates should be accepted for the responsibility at hand. Together, they watched God's influence and celebrated God's action in the selection of another witness.

They were tasked with being witnesses to Christ Jesus. To choose an authoritative witness, they determined to witness once again God's selection, not their own. They set aside all politics, all personal motivations, all subterfuge, all ambition, and all agendas, asking only that God might appoint the one appropriate for the task at hand. It was emblematic of the character of servanthood Jesus had preached. It was emblematic of the principles in the mission left before them. It was an expression of trust, reliance, and confidence in God.

They took self out of the way to put God on center stage. The mission before them would be primary, not any one's personal or group agenda. That is how they determined to go forward amidst all the uncertainty they faced in the absence of Jesus' physical presence.

How will we move forward? Will we allow God to set the agenda? Will we look for ways to focus only on the mission set before us? Our uncertainties, anxieties, and concerns fall by the wayside if we make the mission of Christ central to all we do. Are we ready to let everything else go that Christ Jesus might take center stage? That is, after all, why we are here and why we do what we do.

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