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20/20 Vision

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When I arrived in Alaska in 2003, I wore glasses. Four years later, when I returned to the Lower 48, I no longer needed them. Was it the crisp clean Alaskan air that cured my vision? Was it due to all the vitamin E in fish I ate? Not exactly. It was Lasik eye surgery.

After being on a remote Alaskan island for a year with the nearest optical store 500 miles away, I decided it would be worth my while to check out Lasik eye surgery. This way I could stop worrying about my glasses being potentially broken while being so far away from "civilization". On my next trip down south, I scheduled the surgery.

It's a simple process really: a computer camera scans the eye and makes a topographical map of its surface, showing the areas that need reshaping. Next, a laser beam makes an incision through the cornea, so it can be pulled back to expose the lens. Finally, another pulsing laser beam reshapes the lens. The actual procedure lasts only about 5 minutes per eye.

The reshaping of the eye lens is necessary: when light rays pass through the lens, they are refracted or bent at just the right angle. That way the image formed by the rays will hit the back wall of the eye, called the retina. If the light rays form the image too far in front of the retina or too far behind the retina, then the image will be blurry.

Under normal conditions, the lens of the human eye is flexible. It has the ability to change shape, which in turn changes the thickness of the lens, which causes the light rays travelling through the lens to refract at different angles allowing the eye to adjust its focus; just one of many of God's amazing wonders.

As we get older however, the lenses of our eyes become less flexible, limiting our ability to focus, causing our vision to become blurred. Most people buy glasses or contacts to correct their vision, some get Lasik surgery; others just wish they had longer arms when they're reading!

As a church, the vision for what God would have us be and do can get blurred too. There are probably a number of reasons why this occurs, but I suspect the main reason for our fuzzy vision is that as members of a fallen human race, we naturally tend to drift away from the one who is the true and only source of our vision, purpose, and life.

Remember the line from a famous hymn, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing? There's a line in one of the verses that says, "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, bind my wandering heart to Thee".

From the beginning, we learn in the Bible how mankind has this unrelenting propensity to drift away from our life-giving source. In the book of Genesis we learn how Adam and Eve, even though they lived in an absolutely ideal environment where their maker regularly visited them in the cool of the day -where they felt no shame- still they desired more- and what they wanted was the freedom to come out from under God's authority – no matter how loving and understanding God was. They wanted their autonomy, the freedom to govern themselves, to be morally independent from the one who formed them and from the rules they were to live by.

The bottom line is that Adam and Eve were deceived into believing that their maker did not have their best interest in mind- that somehow God was withholding from them His very best. They called into question the central element of God's character, namely his goodness and love, and the moment we do that, the moment we distrust God, believing He doesn't know what's best for us or is unable or unwilling to give it to us, we find ourselves on very thin ice –

Grasping for things that are completely outside of God's will, but we don't care. We say to ourselves: "I know better than anyone, including God, what's best for me."

But we don't. We only think we know what's best because our vision is blurred and limited! We're not seeing correctly nor fully. We need our vision corrected. It begins by understanding one fundamental truth about the relationship between a Christian and the church – and that is that they cannot be separated. You can't have one without the other.

This is so important to understand. And its misunderstanding is a big reason why the church's testimony is especially weak in the Western society. Many Christians have this crazy idea the church is optional! And when I'm talking church, I'm talking about things way beyond Sunday morning worship service. I'm talking about the fact that when a person becomes a believer in Christ, He is a new creation- see 2 Corinthians 5:17- and he or she, whether they like it or not or are even aware of it or not, become part of God's larger creation, the church.

Think of it this way for a moment: According to Genesis, God took 6 days to create the universe, both the visible and invisible, and on the 7th day He rested. Do you know that from that day forward, God hadn't created a single new thing until we come to the New Testament and read in the book of Acts chapter 2 about God's creation of His Church? It is when God's Spirit came down from heaven and filled the apostles and they all began speaking in different languages. This is the creation of God's church on earth!

For thousands upon thousands of years after those 6 initial days of creation, God sat back and created nothing. Now that doesn't mean God wasn't working or wasn't involved in his creation. On the contrary, Jesus said in John 5:17, *"My Father is always at this work to this very day, and I too am working."*

But God rested from creating until He created His Church, which He couldn't have done without His Son's sacrifice on the cross. That's why Paul writes in Ephesians 2:15, *"His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross."* (In Christ's life, death, resurrection, ascension and the giving of the Holy Spirit, we see the birth/creation of His Church on earth.)

My subject today is basically two-fold, probably best expressed as 2 different but related questions:

1. **What is God's vision or purpose for his new creation, the church to which we Christians are inextricably linked?** In other words, God's vision must be the church's vision and the church's vision must be yours and my vision if we profess faith in Christ.
2. **How can we, as new creations in Christ help achieve the church's purpose?** Because let's never forget that the source of our spiritual life is the same as the church's source of life. When Paul writes in 2 Cor. 5:17, *"If anyone is in Christ, He is a new creation, the old is gone, the new is come."* Paul is speaking primarily about God's church and secondarily about individual Christians who make up the church.

No matter how flawed we think God's church may be, we must not abandon it, because, like humanity, the church is the pinnacle of God's new creation. We need to see with a renewed vision the value and worth God has placed upon His church of which we're members by faith.

When we do, we'll begin to understand what the Apostle Paul meant when He wrote in Ephesians 5:25, *"Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy... and to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."*

And a few verses later, Paul writes: *"No one ever hated his own body, but he feeds it and cares for it, Just as Christ does the church- for we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife- and the two will be one flesh. This is a profound mystery... But I'm talking about Christ and the Church."*

What Paul is saying is that there is nothing more valuable in God's eyes than his church. It's so valuable that He gave us His one and only Son to secure her creation, and he poured out His Spirit to see her perfected!

If you are a Christian, sitting in the pew this morning, do you mind if I ask you a [third and perhaps the most] very serious question? What are you doing to care for and preserve God's church? If your answer is "very little", if anything at all, then maybe it's because your vision of the church has become blurred.

The Apostle Paul does us all a favor when he writes in Ephesians 1:7-8, that God loves his church so much that he lavishes upon her all the riches of his grace, with all his wisdom and understanding, so that one day the church might fulfill her greatest calling – to be a clear and shining example of God's glory.

Well, I'll return to question #1 in a moment: that being "what is God's vision/purpose for his church on earth?" But let me touch on question #2 for a moment: "How can we as Christian leaders help achieve the church's purpose?"

Let me give you an example: I probably don't need to explain how rivers can change over time. A river can change from year to year or even from season to season, and the churches can too. When the spring run-off is high, the river quickly finds places for its extra abundance of water. When the dog days of summer hit, rocks that have been hidden all winter reappear. And when the river changes, the river guide must be alert to the changes as well. A changing river, more than likely, means a change in the navigation route for safety-sake.

How many of you have ever gone rafting? I've done it a time or two. One time, about ten years ago, I went with my brother-in-law and his three teenagers., We went toward the end of the season when the river was pretty low. So you'd think rafting would have been a piece of cake right?

Well, for the most part it was until we came upon a place called "Granny Rapids" the name didn't exactly strike fear into us – but you know what happened? The 2 most experience rafters, not including the river guide, were tossed overboard! -including myself- how embarrassing and shocking!

My point is this: when changes happen, even the most experienced can be caught off guard if they're not alert and ready. Likewise, church leaders need to be on the lookout for change so they can help the church safely navigate through them. But how?

I'll try to answer this question in a moment, but first let's go back to the first question: what is the purpose of the church? I direct you to Ephesians 2:15b-16: (remember that the church's purpose must be in line with Christ's purpose.) *"His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace. And this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility."*

I hope we're able to catch even a shadowy glimpse of what God in Christ has done:

Christ has built something, created something entirely new of which his own physical body has become the foundation of the structure, and to the best of my knowledge it appears to be a bridge. And what purpose does a bridge have, but to connect that which is separated. From the text, we can gather that two different connections are going on: one unable to happen without the other. Man reconciled to God through Christ, and man reconciled to each other through Christ as well.

Jews and Gentiles able to have peace with one another, because of the gulf that is spanned, the gulf between man and God, because of Christ's work on the cross.

And the amazing thing is, is that once we come to faith in Christ, we became part of the structure/bridge that helps others come to Christ. I read from 1 Peter 2:4-5, *"As you come to him, the living stone- rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him – you also like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a royal priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."*

This is a picture of the church carrying out its purpose which could be summed up in this: Being the bridge on which God's enemies travel to come home.

Have you ever thought of your faith in Christ in this way? Can you think of a greater sacrifice? Just saying it can bring uneasiness and discomfort.

God wants me to serve his enemies? Remember that's who we were, God's enemies. See Romans 5:10: *"For if when we were God's enemies we were reconciled to him through the death of his son how much more, having being reconciled, shall we be saved through his life?"*

That said, is there an answer to the first question: **What's the church's purpose?** I'll say it again: we are to be the bridge on which God's enemies travel to come home. That was God's purpose for Christ. That's Christ's purpose for His church.

And now for question #2: **How can a Christian leader help the church carry out her purpose?**

I direct your attention to Revelation 22:1-3: *"The angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and in the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."*

As Christians, we're all called to be leaders within our circle of influence, and the best thing we can do to assure our leadership is effective is to stay close to the source.

Being a bridge for God's enemies to cross over makes no sense from a worldly point of view. We live in an age when Christians are more concerned with demanding their rights than they are seeking service to God.

It's time for the church to realize that our calling in Christ is not one of comfort and convenience on this side of heaven. It's one of sacrificial service. We the church, can carry out Christ's purpose to be a bridge, so that others can cross-over to life. We can do it if we remain close to the source of life. This is where John finds himself in Revelation 22- near the throne of God and of the lamb.

From here he gets a taste of heaven. From here he sees the fruits of the church's labor and sees her purpose – the leaves are for the healing of the nations.

Recall Psalm 1:3? *"Blessed is the man who walks with God. He is like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither."* From near the throne, John sees the awesome promise and privilege of serving God- of seeing Him face to face.

How is your vision of the church? Is it fuzzy and blurry?

How do you see yourself fitting in?

May our vision become closer to God's vision as we stay close to God, the source of all truth and life.