

INTRODUCTION

Well, aren't we glad that 2020 is over and we are enjoying a healthy, calm, stress-free 2021! I read that someone asked, "What if 2020 is just the trailer of 2021?" No thanks. Last week I saw that someone posted this thought about 2021. "I'd like to cancel by subscription to 2021. I've tried it for 10 days, and I'm not interested."

For those of you who are watching on television from home, turn up your volume. Done? Okay, "Alexa, skip to 2022!" If that doesn't work, "Alexa, play the song Amazing Grace." I've always wanted to do that.

In January of last year, we had a Family Reunion Sunday where we all gathered together for two worship times that combined Resonate and our South Campus. How many of you were here for that?

At that service, Pastor Michael and I revealed our new church vision statement. Even though COVID restrictions prevent us from packing out our buildings today, we are still going to celebrate today on a day we're calling Vision Sunday. We will have over 2000 people gathered and spread out in our facilities and there will be thousands more who are watching us on livestream or television.

To understand the context of this passage, Jesus had been fielding hard questions from the Jewish Leaders. They were basically divided into two political parties who hated one another. The Sadducees were the liberals and the Pharisees were the conservatives. (Sound familiar?) About the only thing they agreed on was to get rid of Jesus. The liberal party, the Sadducees, had been trying to get Him to say something that would turn the crowd against Him. Most of the questions were trick questions. Round one went to Jesus—and the Sadducees were silenced. Then round two was the Pharisees. One of them asked Jesus a trick question, but Jesus gave a serious answer.

Matthew 22:34-40. "When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. And one of them, an expert in the law, asked a question to test him: 'Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.'"

If you were to count the different commandments in the written Old Testament, the Torah, you would come up with 613 different commandments. But the Rabbis decided that wasn't enough. So they added layers of oral laws. For instance, one of the Ten Commandments was to Observe the Sabbath: Don't work that day. But what was "work?" So the Rabbis went into minute details and created 39 different categories of work and each one of them had dozens of rules. So back then the Pharisees tried to obey all the rules and they couldn't. But this isn't just history. Today, if you are an Ultra-Orthodox Jew, you still try to observe these thousands of

minute rules and regulations to please Yahweh but of course, they would not speak or write the name Yahweh because that's one of their rules.

Jesus said He didn't come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. He also summarized it. He said there are two main rules to obey, and these two cover all the regulations in the Law and the Prophets. And these are simple to remember: (1) Love God supremely; and (2) Love your neighbor sacrificially.

So on this Vision Sunday, I want to remind you of the importance of loving God and loving our neighbors. I would like to lay three important challenges before you:

1. LET'S UNITE AROUND OUR CHURCH VISION.

You're going to hear me talking a lot about this in 2021 – but one of the most precious blessings that our church has right now is the Unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. One of the tools the devil has used from the beginning is to try to destroy the unity of the church. It's amazing how churches have split over such petty issues. Near Mayfield, Kentucky there is an old church named No Peg Baptist Church. During the days of circuit riding preachers, one group of people in a little church wanted to put a peg inside the church for the preacher to hang his overcoat on. Some members reacted negatively to desecrating the church, so they left and formed the no-peg Baptist Church. That seems funny, but we still may discover that a group breaks away this year and names their church No-mask Baptist church.

Division within churches has always existed. Paul wrote these strong words to the congregation in Corinth. "Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction. For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers and sisters, by members of Chloe's people, that there is rivalry among you." (1 Corinthians 1:10-11 CSB)

And if you keep on reading, you'll find they were divided over who should be their leaders. Some said, "I'm for Paul." Others said, "Not me. I'm for Apollos." Still others said, "You're both wrong. I'm for Simon Peter." Does that sound familiar?

Right now, in America and even in our church, our members are divided over politics. Some say, "I'm for Trump, We've got to stop the steal!" Others are saying, "No, you're wrong. Biden was legally elected, he's our next President." I've told you many times that I despise politics. Politics comes from two words "*poly*" meaning "many" and "*tics*" which are blood-sucking pests.

I realize in our church membership we have good people who disagree about politics. Our nation is deeply divided, and that is not going to change anytime soon. But we must make sure that this ugly, hostile, divisive spirit doesn't invade and destroy our church—and I'm not talking about a building. I'm talking about the Body of Christ called Green Acres.

It hasn't happened yet. I believe we are still a unified congregation. But nothing would please Satan more than for this political division to divide the unity of our church. I'm committed to maintaining the unity of our church, and I need all of you to join me in guarding this precious unity.

Let me give you an illustration about unity. Unity is like music. If one person is playing one instrument all alone, they can play any notes or any tempo they prefer. They are doing a solo. If you put several musicians in a room playing different instruments to different tunes and rhythm—each doing their own solo, it sounds unpleasant—that's disharmony. A couple of years ago at our Christmas musical, Clayton Cox came out playing a drum solo for "Little Drummer Boy." He did a great job, but it was just a solo. There was no way to know if he was unified with a larger group. Something was missing. But when it was added to the rest of the choir and orchestra, you realize that he is not just playing as solo, he's part of something larger and more beautiful.

What a beautiful picture of the Christian life. God didn't call us to play a bunch of solos. He called us and put us in a body – each with different gifts and abilities. And when we are unified and playing the same music, the result is a beautiful harmonious symphony of worship and ministry.

Of course our main score is the Bible itself. But every church needs to have a vision that unites us. The Bible says in Proverbs 29, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." Last January, we introduced our new vision statement: Transforming lives with the truth of Jesus.

A good vision statement must have three c's. It must be clear, compelling, and concise. I challenge you that we stay united around our common vision.

2. LET'S UNITE AROUND OUR MINISTRY VALUES.

Our vision statement answers the question "What?" Our ministry values answer the question, "How?" How are we going to accomplish the vision? Here are three values in three words: CONNECT; GROW; MULTIPLY. Let's review each one of them.

(1) CONNECT to Jesus.

God's plan for each of us is to have a personal relationship with Him through Jesus. Eternal life is knowing Jesus. Have you ever personally connected with Jesus Christ? Let me illustrate this. Let's think about human relationships. Have you ever met someone for the first time and you enter into conversation and that developed into a real friendship? Or maybe that person later became your spouse. Something happened in the initial conversation. Most people describe it this way: "We just connected." Or "There was an instant connection."

A spiritual connection to Jesus is what is required for salvation. And it's what is required for service. We can't transform people, only Jesus can. But He can do it through you when you are

connected to Him. Jesus said, “I am the vine. You are the branches. If you stay connected to me, and I am in you, you will bear much fruit. For without me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

(2) GROW in Jesus.

Once you place your faith in Jesus and are, the next step to take is to be baptized. The first time the Gospel was preached on the Day of Pentecost, the people were convicted and they said, “What must we do?” Peter said in Acts 2:38: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins.” That day 3000 were saved and baptized.

So as you stand at the beginning of a calendar year, you should ask yourself two key questions: Am I connected to Jesus for salvation? Do I have a personal relationship with Him? Next am I connected with the body of Christ through baptism? Have you been baptized, which means by immersion, after you placed your faith in Jesus? I’m not talking about being sprinkled as a baby. We dedicate young children and their families to God, but we don’t use water and call it baptism. Why? Because that’s not the model and mode of baptism throughout the New Testament.

Once you place your faith in Jesus and are baptized, you are like a spiritual baby and you need to grow. The two best ways to grow spiritually are by daily getting into God’s Word and praying.

Every growing Christian has a habit of daily prayer and study of the Word. But that’s not enough, you need to connect with a group of believers who will help you grow in the faith. In Green Acres we call these Connect Groups. The purpose of Connect Groups isn’t just to learn the Bible. It’s where fellowship and ministry take place.

During COVID, education has taken place through in-person learning and online learning. Many studies have shown that students thrive more when they are able to engage in learning in person. Last fall, TISD gave students a choice of in-person learning or remote learning. By November, TISD had cancelled the remote option because according to Dr. Marty Crawford, they found that 60% of online students were failing. I think there’s a great lesson there. Sure, you can watch church on television, and you can study online Bible studies. You can even zoom with your connect group. But there is an intangible factor that happens when people gather together. And I realize we are still on the upward curve of COVID cases and deaths. But what about several months from now, when God willing, it is safe to gather? Many of you will be tempted to keep on going to church in your pajamas. But I want remind you that the best way to GROW in your faith is to be personally engaged in a Connect Group.

(3) MULTIPLY for Jesus.

Jesus marching orders for the church was to go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. When you connect with the person of Jesus, and are connected with the people of Jesus, you are also connected to the PURPOSE of Jesus. He said, “The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.” (Luke 19:10 KJV)

In Genesis God told Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply.” That has always been His call to the church. We can’t be satisfied with just those who are already saved. We must continue to share the good news.

The church started with 120 people in an upper room. Then 3,000 were saved, but they continued to multiply. In Acts 6:7 the Bible says that “The word of God increased and the number of disciples multiplied.” Then in Acts 9 we’re told that “the number of churches multiplied.”

Connect, Grow, and Multiply. You’ll see those three values printed on the signs around the church. But rather than just be printed on signs, they need to be engraved on our hearts. These values unite us.

3. LET’S UNITE AROUND OUR PASSION TO SHOW GOD’S LOVE TO OUR NEIGHBORS.

We must unite around our vision and our values. And we must also be united around our passion to show God’s love. Jesus said that the first commandment is to love God supremely and the second is to love our neighbors sacrificially.

At the beginning of last year, we launched our theme for 2020 which was Love East Texas. We had dozens of special ministries and events planned for the year. Of course, we all know what happened to our plans. We kept waiting to see if the restrictions would ease and ministry could go back to normal. But last fall our perspective changed and we said, “Okay, what can we still do this year to show God’s love to our community?” And our staff team came up with some incredible ideas.

So, God willing, we are going to continue this theme for 2021. We are going to continue to find creative ways to show God’s love in practical ways to members of our community. And if God gives you an idea, let us know and we’ll try to make it happen.

So on this vision Sunday, we’ve answered two questions. What are we to be about? That’s our *vision*: Transforming Lives with the truth of Jesus. Second, How are we going to do it? By *connecting* to Jesus; *growing* in Jesus; and *multiplying* for Jesus.

But perhaps the most important question is *why*? Why are we going to blitz our community with acts of kindness in Jesus’ name? Is it so that we can get positive PR? No. Is it because we get a good fuzzy feeling from performing acts of kindness? No. The reason is because we want lost people to know that God loves them. When we perform acts of kindness asking nothing in return, people want to know, “Why?” Our answer is that God loves you so much that He gave His one-and-only son, and if you believe in Him you will not perish, but have everlasting life.” Think about that word that we sometimes just gloss over: PERISH. Our bottom-line motivation is that we believe that people are lost and bound for hell without Jesus.

In Luke 16, Jesus told the story about what happened to two men after they died. One was a poor but faithful man named Lazarus. He died a beggar and the angels carried him into Heaven

beside Abraham. The rich man was unnamed, but he died and had a big fancy funeral. But after he died, he woke up in the torment of hell. One of the scariest things that Jesus taught about the afterlife is that the rich man in hell could see Lazarus in Heaven. He recognized him as he beggar Lazarus who used to beg for alms outside his mansion.

So Jesus said the rich man yelled up to Heaven. He said, “Father Abraham, send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and bring it to me and touch my tongue because I am tormented in this flame.” He was still giving orders to Lazarus.

But Abraham said, “Sorry, buddy. There’s a great gulf fixed between here and where you are, and there are no travelers between the two.” But I’ve always been fascinated by the next request of the rich man in hell. He said, “Then, Father Abraham, please send Lazarus to my daddy’s house. I have five brothers there. Have Lazarus warn them NOT to come to this place of torment!” Abraham said, “They have the same Bible Lazarus had, let them read it.” The rich man said, “No. but if someone comes back from the dead, they will believe.” And Jesus gave Abraham the last word which was a prediction of His own resurrection. Abraham said, “If they don’t believe the written Bible, they won’t believe even if someone comes back from the dead.”

I’ve often said that the rich man in hell had a greater burden for lost people than most of us do. According to Jesus, if you could interview someone who is currently in hell, their first request would be, “Get me out of here!” And when they discover that’s impossible, their next request would be, “Please go to this address in Tyler, Texas and warn my loved ones to put their faith in Jesus. I don’t want them to come to this place of torment!”

Over the last thirty years, I’ve asked this rhetorical question to our church: Does Green Acres exist primarily for those of us who are already saved, or do we exist for those who don’t yet know Jesus? If we answer, “We’ll exist for the sake of our members,” then we don’t need a vision statement. We can just have our little holy huddles and let the rest of the world go to hell. But if we exist to share the good news with lost people so that lives will be transformed by the truth of Jesus, then we need to ask God to give us a burden for lost people in our community.

We are living in a scary, world. But I want to remind you that this world is NOT our home. We’re just traveling through. As followers of Jesus Christ, we don’t get our joy out of what happens or doesn’t happen in Washington D. C. We have a Savior by the name of Jesus and the Bible says in Romans 8 that we aren’t just conquerors—we are MORE than conquerors through Him who loved us! Folks, Satan seems to be winning a few of the battles lately, but don’t forget that Jesus has already won the war! My Bible says in 1 Corinthians 15, “And thanks be to God who gives us the VICTORY through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

CONCLUSION

Our vision helps us maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This vision gives us the ability to join hearts and join hands and move into the future. That’s the power of teamwork. It will take all of us together to accomplish it. Are you in?

We haven't seen snow for a while. We'll see if we get any tonight. A single snowflake is just a tiny, beautiful six-sided ice crystal. It is so light and insignificant it will melt in your hand. Alone it's not much. But when you put trillions of them together like in some of the blizzards up north, they can shut down a major city and an entire region.

Alone, we're not much, but with the unity of the Spirit and the passion to show God's love, our message can transform an entire region for Christ. Where there is no vision, the people perish. But where there is a vision a church can be unified and there will be LIFE—everlasting and abundant life.

OUTLINE

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“Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction. For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers and sisters, by members of Chloe’s people, that there is rivalry among you.” *1 Corinthians 1:10-11 CSB*

TRANSFORMING LIVES WITH THE TRUTH OF JESUS

2. LET'S UNITE AROUND OUR MINISTRY VALUES.

- (1) CONNECT to Jesus.
- (2) GROW in Jesus.
- (3) MULTIPLY for Jesus.

3. LET'S UNITE AROUND OUR PASSION TO SHOW GOD'S LOVE TO OUR NEIGHBORS.

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



*David O. Dykes, Pastor
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