

A Vision for God in God's Mission - by Roland G Kuhl

Ministry fails when our perspective is too narrow or too small.

We get fixated on the wrong thing
– **and so we miss what God is up to.**

When we are fixated on a particular vision of ministry or even a particular ministry, **we are unaware that our eyesight borders on blindness.**

The Corinthians thought they had great eyesight, a perspective or vision that was clear enough,
– however, they were divided
– they saw things differently
– they saw different things
– they supported different ways of engaging in ministry.

Some thought they had the right vision, the right direction for ministry, they were behind the right leader
– they said, “I follow Paul.” “It is all about planting!”

They had invested in the latest planting equipment, the latest planting strategy – for planting the Gospel

Others thought, “No, not Paul, Apollos.” Apollos had the right vision, the right ministry, he was the right leader.

– “I follow Apollos.” “It is all about watering!”

It's all about having the right irrigation equipment, the right irrigation layout – for watering the seed of the Gospel!

So what does Paul say to their quarreling about whose ministry is more important, whose program or strategy deserves a larger budget allocation?

He says: “brothers and sisters, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly, mere infants in Christ.”

In the midst of their quarreling about whose ministry is more important, or whose vision for ministry is greater, or whose approach to ministry is more effective, he asks, **“are you not worldly?”**

Now **not** everything about the world is a bad thing

- God created the world, and we read God saying, “it was good”
- and when we took what was good and destroyed it, God did not abandon us
- God so loved the world that God sent Jesus into the world, to save the world, to recreate the world, to reconcile and recreate us!

And God's love for us who had become so worldly was revealed in Jesus coming into the world; taking on our broken humanity and dwelling among us

So, being worldly has little to do with being in the world!

Being worldly has nothing to do with seeing the world; it has everything to do with **what we do not see!**

Being worldly has nothing to do with living in the world – being incarnational; it has everything to do with **how we are not being the body of Christ in the world.**

Being worldly has nothing to do with what we see; it has everything to do with what we don't see – or perhaps more to the point:

Who we don't see!

When we are worldly, we just don't see the people in the world the way God sees them.

So what were the Corinthians not seeing when they were quarreling about “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos?”

To see what God sees,

To notice what God notices,

Calls us to first to see God

Paul tells them: “What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul (who am I)?

Only servants through who you came to believe.

We were doing our assigned tasks. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it.

Those are necessary things, but not THE thing!

Don't you see WHO you do not see

– who you are missing in all this quarreling

– who makes all what we have done grow?

– who makes what was planted and watered grow?

– who is making you grow?

– GOD

– God has been making it grow. “So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything but God who makes things grow.”

In the midst of our quarreling we miss God, we don't see God – and so we miss all that God wants us to see, to notice

We may have all the right programs or the right strategies – but that is to miss what we had not dare miss.

It's about God!

Don't you see that in order to be co-workers with God; **is to realize that God is at work!**

God is the one:

- **who initiates the work**
- **who does the work**
- **who completes the work**
- **It is God’s work, God’s field, God’s building**

God is about fulfilling the mission of God!

And also, though this passage talks about us as co-workers with God;

It is not about us as co-workers, or our unique ministries as co-workers; **it is about God who is at work in the world.**

Story – Abby at TEDS “not about me”

[I was teaching a course at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School on a missional perspective of Scripture – exploring God’s actions throughout the Bible. About half way through the semester, one of my students interrupted me asking, “Dr. Kuhl, so it’s not about me?” To which I responded, “Yes, that’s right, it’s about God and what God is up to in the world!” She continued, “So, it’s not about me!” And I said, “Yes, that’s right – you got it.” We continued that exchange for another two or three times until she realized that God is the One who is active in mission and we are invited to participate with God in mission – we do not have to create ministry – that is up to God. All we are to do is participate with God – which takes the pressure off of us to be successful in ministry.]

In this world

- God is at work
- God is doing only what God can do – God makes things grow.

Yes, we somehow work together with God, but at best I am a co-laborer, one who labors with God, enlisted by God to participate with God in God’s work.

I know what being a laborer is.

I used to work with my dad, when I came home summers from college.
But my dad did the block and brick laying;

I mixed the mortar,
I hauled bricks and blocks,
I hauled mortar to my dad so that he could do his work
– lay brick, lay block.

My dad worked,
I labored, co-labored with him.

God is the One who is working, God is making all things grow.

Ministry is not about our vision,
Not about the pastor’s vision,
Not about engaging in the right ministry or following the best leader

– it is about recognizing that God is at work in the world!

- God was at work in creation!
- God was at work throughout the history of Israel!
- God was at work throughout the ministry of Jesus!
- God was at work throughout the history of the church!
- And God is at work in our lives, in the lives of our neighbors, in our communities, and in the world
- **God is at work today!**
- **In your life, in this community, in your community, in my community, in the world!**

I came to realize one day exactly how God works in the world.

I had been reading Richard Foster's book, *Streams of Living Water*, which describes how six different spiritual traditions shape us as followers of Jesus.

Jesus exemplified all these spiritual traditions – contemplative, holiness, charismatic, social justice, evangelical, and incarnational.

In reading the chapter on the *Contemplative Tradition*, I read about Frank C. Laubach, who was a missionary to the Philippines.

Laubach engaged in many experiments of prayer.

One of his prayer experiments involved what he called, “flash prayers.”

He would pray for people as he walked by them on the street

– just short sentence prayers, prayers for people he did not know, prayers that expressed: “Lord, bless them today,” or “Lord Jesus, watch over them today,” or “Lord, may they sense you near to them today”

– short prayers for the people we pass by too quickly on our way to something else, some other appointment.

I thought I would try out this experiment.

Our Mennonite Ministries office is about 9 miles from my house and it takes me about 20 minutes to drive there.

As I drove I planned to pray for the people driving towards me in the other lane

– I would notice them behind the wheel and offer a short sentence prayer for them.

As I started down Route 83, I began to pray for the woman in the minivan – “Lord, may she have a blessed day;”

I offered up a short prayer for the school bus driver – “Jesus, thank you for their ministry of taking kids to school;”

I prayed for what looked like a teenager in a Mustang – “Lord, keep them safe today.”

Short simple prayers just like that.

I was not ready for what happened next.

As I prayed for these people I was overwhelmed.

As I prayed for these people, whose faces hardly registered with me as I drove past then, **my heart began to sense how deeply each person matters to God**, how much God loves each one of these people – personally, intimately

– God is concerned about all that goes on in their lives.

For me, they were mere faces speeding by me; yet for God they were ones whom God knows deeply and intimately, whom God loves

– God knows their names, their doings, what is going on in their lives – their needs, their hopes, their struggles, their longings, their cries, their relationships, their hurts, their joys.

These people might have been strangers to me, **but they were not strangers to God.**

I began to realize **how** God sees them!

I began to catch a glimpse, in a very small way, an overwhelming way

– because my eyes started to tear up

– how deeply God loves each one of these persons

– how God is reaching out to them

– how the Spirit of God is active in each of their lives

– **how Jesus is drawing each one to himself.**

In these people's lives, God is actively working in each of them

– and I wondered,

How many of them knew how deeply God loves them and cares for them?

Laboring with God is not about the labor, it is about the people whom God loves.

Participating with God in God's mission is not about the mission – **it is about the people whom Jesus came to embrace and set free.**

It is not primarily about what God is doing and what God is saying – **but whom God is engaging and to whom God is speaking.**

Jesus' ministry was not just about his preaching – **he spoke to persons whom others did not notice . . . , he touched people whom others went out of their way not to touch.**

When we read the Gospels, we miss what God is up to if we just read about what Jesus is saying or notice what Jesus is doing **without also noticing to whom Jesus is speaking and whom Jesus is engaging.**

Many of us have Bibles in which Jesus' words are highlighted in "red,"

Yet, what God wants us to notice,

If we are to be co-workers with God,

If we are to participate with God in God's mission

– **is to whom Jesus spoke**

– **whom Jesus touched**

– **with whom Jesus walked**

- with whom Jesus sat at table
- with whom Jesus wept
- with whom Jesus laughed.

If Zondervan Publishers,
 alongside all the “Men’s Study Bibles,” and “Women’s Study Bibles,” and “Teen’s Study Bibles,”

Were to publish “Jesus’ Study Bible” we would discover something very different – Jesus would request that rather than highlighting all he said in red, **that instead, all the people Jesus spoke to and ministered ought to be highlighted in “red.”**

And it is these people whom Jesus noticed 2000 years ago, and it is people such as these that the Spirit of God in our lives wants us to notice today . . .

So it is not about Paul, it’s not about Apollos.

At North Suburban Mennonite Church, it is not about me – Roland Kuhl;

Here at East Bend, it is not about Michael Dean;

In the IMC, it is not about Chuck Neufeld.

In the MC USA, it is not about Ervin Stutzman

It is about God, and whom God notices!

It is about God, and to whom God sent Jesus.

It is about God, and the broken humanity that Jesus embraced!

God is at work in the lives of people!

The mission of God is not about the mission; **it is about the people God desires to set free and reconcile!**

The ones who make up God’s field, God’s building – **these are broken stones that the Spirit seeks to touch through us to become living stones!**

Jesus is drawing to himself broken people to set us all free

- making us into a new people, a new humanity, a new community
- a people who demonstrate to others what new life is, how new life is to be lived
- a people who matter to God
- a people in whom the Spirit of God is at work.

We are co-workers with God, not because we are gifted at ministry
 – the Spirit helps us with that (that is why we receive gifts of the Spirit),

But because we notice whom God notices; noticing the people whom God is noticing
 – we like Jesus, are to come alongside them, to walk with them, to talk with them, to embrace them

Jesus embraced us in our brokenness,

Jesus embraced me in my brokenness.

My Story:

[I was not changed until Jesus embraced me. I grew up in the church, but for me the Christian life was trying to keep up with Jesus, following a whole list of do's and don'ts – by the time I was ready to graduate from high school, I realized that I did not have it in me, I did not have the strength to live the Christian life – I could never keep up with Jesus.

From Sunday School and church I knew God to be real, that Jesus died to save me from my sins, but no matter how hard I tried I would never be in a relationship with Jesus. In fact, my image of following Jesus was running after him just trying to keep up. But when I fell and then managed to pick myself up, there was Jesus and those who could keep up with him heading out over the horizon – there was no way I had the energy to keep following Jesus.

And so in the first year of college, I knew I had to figure out how to follow Jesus or give up on God. I could not figure it out. I saw others in whom Jesus was alive, but I did not know how to get Jesus to be alive in me – so I gave up.

I gave up at a youth retreat over a Canadian Thanksgiving (in October). I was there with everyone else, but I was miserable. On the last day I shared with the group that I was giving up trying to follow Jesus because I could never have a relationship with him like they had. The leader Bryan offered to pray with me, and I said, “Go ahead, give it a shot, but it's not going to matter – I've tried this before.” But Bryan prayed, and as he prayed, maybe because it was I gave up trying, I felt Jesus physically embracing me – wrapping his arms around me and accepting me. I had never experienced God's love like that before – I had always tried to earn it – and only in giving up on God, could God embrace me.

Now as I look at my walking with Jesus, I still fall on my face, but when I look up, his hand is reaching down to me and he says to me, “Roland, give me your hand; I will help you up – Come walk with me.”]

Jesus says to all who are broken, “Come unto me all you who are weary and burdened, I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and walk with me . . .” (cf. Matthew 11: 28ff)

As we notice whom God wants us to notice, **the Spirit nudges us to take a step further**
– to embrace them
– to help others to see that God loves them, is at work in them
– that the Spirit seeks to transform their lives, just as the Spirit has transformed us
– making each of us, all of us into the image of the Son Jesus Christ.

God sees people differently than we do.

I still tend to make issues out of people I am uncomfortable with, people who are hurting and broken, rather than seeing them as God sees them.

Tony Campolo tells the story of a conservative evangelical pastor friend of his:

[He received a call on a Friday from a funeral home director to do a funeral of a young man who had died, a man who did not have a church home. The pastor looking toward his full weekend, hesitated and asked, “how did he die?” The funeral home director responded that he died of complications due to AIDS. There was a silence over the phone and then the pastor asked, “could you find someone else?” The funeral director responded that there was no one else, he was the last one on the list – could he do the funeral?

The pastor reluctantly agreed. He did the funeral – however, he just went through the motions, and at the grave site, he quickly offered words of committal and a prayer and was getting ready to leave. It was starting to rain – but then he noticed that the group of friends who came out to the gravesite were not moving and so he asked, “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

One of them responded, “Some of us grew up in church, but most of us are no longer welcome or feel welcome. Isn’t it customary to read Psalm 23 at a funeral service? You didn’t read Psalm 23. Could you read Psalm 23?”

And so the pastor read Psalm 23 to the listening group of friends of this man who died of AIDS. And as he finished reading, another spoke up, “is there not a passage in the Bible that says nothing can remove us from the love of God – could you read that?” He read from Romans 8. And for about an hour, his friends were asking to hear Scripture being read and this pastor read to them, words of comfort, words of hope, words of God.”]

May we see people the way God sees people.

In noticing whom God notices – we participate with God in making all people new!

**We are co-laborers with God,
But more so than that -**

We are to be co-lovers with God!

I invite you to pray
Ask God to give you eyes to notice whom God wants you to see,

And in seeing, ask God whom God wants you to embrace

For we are co-laborers, co-lovers with God, God’s field, God’s building.

I’ve asked Chuck Neufeld to share a song with us as we pray – *All my favorite people are broken*