



CHAPTER 1

Face the Truth About Yourself

Imagine a group of important leaders calling you into a fancy boardroom. They say, “Okay, we’ve selected you to be in charge of changing the world forever. Your job is to create a delivery system that will reach every single person in the world. Oh, and it needs to be done *yesterday*.”

Actually, something like that happened to me.

I was humbled, to put it mildly, on the day I received the challenge. I was asked to serve as chairman of the Great Commission Resurgence Task Force of the Southern Baptist Convention. Sure, it sounds like just another church committee. Bureaucratic titles make even the miraculous sound mundane. But there’s nothing dull at all about this endeavor—not when you really think about it, not when you truly understand what’s at stake on Planet Earth. And I did understand—or at least I thought I did, in the beginning. I knew all about the Great

Commission. When Jesus ascended to heaven, He left us with a mandate to penetrate every corner of our world with His message, His offer of salvation from the sin that destroys us. His charge went like this:

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:19–20)

The Great Commission had already been my passion; it's the lifeblood of my denomination and of evangelical Christianity. So you can imagine the fire that was lit in my soul when I was asked to chair such a group. The task force involved twenty-two leaders and thinkers with a mandate to study for one year and then bring forward fresh insights about what might be the most effective way we could finally do what we haven't done in two thousand years—penetrate the unreached world with the gospel and make disciples of all the nations. I knew this was the most wonderful, significant opportunity I would ever undertake in my earthly life.

Upon further review, however, I began to feel overwhelmed. I only thought I knew what it meant to fulfill the Great Commission. It's a stated goal that Christian groups throw around almost casually. We voice it all the time, because it's what we all want to do. Now, however, I realized the magnitude of the quest. It was like hearing about the Grand Canyon all your life, maybe seeing a few pictures of it, and then actually standing there at the edge of it for the first time, with the wind whipping at your collar and a great, fiery sunset on the western horizon. There's just no way to be prepared for the awe and

wonder. The reality outstrips the simple concept. The Great Commission really is a simple concept:

Tell every person in the world about Jesus Christ and make disciples of all nations.

That's a mission statement so basic a young child can grasp it. But the reality of the Great Commission—well, that's another story, and I had not come to terms with it.

Our task force read widely. We studied. We investigated. As a result, we came to grips with a vast, sprawling, complex, rapidly changing global village. We considered the languages, the cultures, the new opportunities and ancient obstacles of communicating our message to seven billion people, each soul as unique as his or her fingerprints, each one infinitely precious to God. In this “Grand Canyon moment,” we were overwhelmed by reality, and we knew we had to be honest with ourselves. We weren't playing games.

Defining the task accurately would be mind-bending. And that was just for starters. We would also have to convince sixteen million Southern Baptists in over forty-five thousand churches that our definition was the right one, and that this endeavor should become the great work of their lives. We would be responsible for making everyone see the reality of this work, while remaining excited about forging ahead with it ourselves. Now do you begin to see why the idea of awakening the Great Commission is staggering?

Jesus said to us in Acts 1:8, in the other great statement of the Commission, “You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

He was talking about a ripple effect, ever-expanding circles of massive salvation, each one a new and different demographic

reality. Jesus intends us to answer, what is the reality of Jerusalem? of Judea? of Samaria? of your neighborhood, your gender, your generation, your socioeconomic group? Those who came directly after Him—the generation of the apostle Paul—made those ripples happen in spectacular fashion. The first Christians moved across languages and cultures, defying hostility, languages, demonic opposition, and tremendous odds, until our faith won out over the greatest political empire in history, the Roman Empire. The gospel was shared; disciples were made in many nations of that period.

So we know it can be done, and we have at our disposal all kinds of technology and tools that Paul and his fellow missionaries didn't have. But consider the obstacles, even for those who embrace the challenge of defining reality. That technology is a two-edged sword. We live in a world of misinformation. Media reporters and political leaders throw out new falsehoods every day so that we fail to understand our world and even ourselves. A barrage of TV commercials push us toward the belief that personal happiness is tied up in how many toys we own or in how many varieties of physical pleasure we pursue. The opinion makers—their reality has changed too. Their legions have swelled exponentially in our generation through technology, particularly the Internet. Our eyes and ears and minds are constantly filled with the white noise of this blog or that talk show—and so few of those are bound up in the truth we know to be in God's eternal Word. So many opinions, so much advice, yet there is one God and one truth. In the incessant babble of our times, I'm driven to God, to hear the only voice that matters.

I hope your head isn't already spinning. When we discuss awakening the giant, mobilizing the Great Commission for this world at this time, we must start somewhere, and that means,

of course, at the most basic level: ourselves. We can't define the reality outside us until we handle what is within. I must therefore begin with myself—and with my God.

A High-Def Mirror

The first battle to be fought is the one for my heart and soul. I know my limitations. I look inside, see how fallen and helpless I am, and know my only hope is to trust Him. There is a wonderful passage in the New Testament that cuts to the heart of this problem of the inconsistencies in my spiritual life:

But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. Because if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man looking at his own face in a mirror; for he looks at himself, goes away, and right away forgets what kind of man he was. (James 1:22–24)

In this word picture, the man looks into a clear mirror. Mirrors don't lie; they define reality in full color. Let's imagine this man sees a dab of toothpaste stuck to his chin. It makes good sense for him to wipe off the smudge, right? Someone who is not a doer of the Word, James tells us, is like a man just leaving the paste there. He is ignoring the truth that has just been presented to him.

God's Word is a mirror that shows us who we are in high definition. It defines reality with harsh precision. As I read the Bible, I find that this book has me nailed. What all those political leaders, Madison Avenue wizards, and Internet chatterers—even my closest friends—don't understand about me, the Scriptures do. I open the covers, gaze into the reflection, and see myself looking back. The reality of myself. This is why

we are disciplined to study our Bibles every morning to prepare for the day spiritually, just as we look into the bathroom mirror to prepare for the day physically.

Reading the Word, I'm humbled. I'm encouraged. I'm strengthened because I know exactly where I stand. But when I finish my morning devotional time, put aside the Bible, and get busy with my day, I'm in danger of losing the reality I've been shown. I need a disciplined mind and will; I must cling to the truth as I begin to walk through this world, knowing that thousands of competing messages—sometimes subtle, always powerful, generally lies—will assault my thinking. If Scripture is a high-definition mirror, then these are fun-house mirrors. They seek to amuse us by telling us agreeable lies about ourselves.

I must admit that I am the source of my share of these competing messages. I am tempted to rationalize my sin, to play games rather than be honest, or to take the easy way out during those defining moments of life, when it's absolutely critical that I know how to be honest with myself. Whether it's some disembodied voice in technology or some inner voice generated by my foolish pride or spiritual laziness, I must ignore the world's lies and follow the Word's truth. Narrow is that path, Jesus tells us, the path of self-honesty; wide is the avenue that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13–14).

I also need to be aware of my concern for image and perception. Just like you, I want to be loved, accepted, and admired; it's a matter of human nature. But we can become slaves to the approval of others. We want to please other people at all times. For the best and most valid of reasons, we want to please a spouse, a supervisor at work, a leader at church. We want our friends to think highly of us. There's nothing wrong with any of that—until approval becomes our defining reality. Then our quest for approval becomes a lifelong pursuit of fool's gold.

Life is to be lived for an audience of One. Here's an encouraging thought: if I can focus utterly and completely on pleasing God, suddenly life becomes very simple. I've defined my path, and His Word will light that path for every step. I no longer need to listen to all the competing voices out there. I may not please all the people all the time, but I will do my best to live as God wants me to, and that will be my reality. Ultimately we must all make that choice, as Paul did: "For am I now trying to win the favor of people, or God? Or am I striving to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a slave of Christ" (Galatians 1:10).

It's time for me to get real—to be honest with myself and before God. Do I want the truth? Can I handle the truth?

Our Last Great Hope

Why all this talk about reality and honesty? I raise these questions for one reason. Take a good look around you, at the direction of our world. All things considered, would you say it's a better or a worse place than a few years ago? Set the parameters of your evaluation any way you choose: our nation, the international scene, popular culture, our economy, our ecology, our politics, our families. Most of us would answer that we are a generation in decline. Many Christians believe that Christ may return soon. Even nonbelievers sense that calamity awaits us in some form.

If we, with all our technology, all our intelligence, and all our human philosophies, had the solution to this decline, don't you think we would have produced it by now, in these thousands of years of human civilization? Modernism hasn't created utopia. Science has created as many problems as it has solved. I must conclude that our last great hope lies beyond our human

capabilities. The course of civilization has borne out what the Bible has said all along: we are fallen and deceived creatures; whatever we try—by our means—will be doomed to corruption because we are innately corrupted by our own sin.

There is one last great hope—for our world, our nation, our children, and our churches. That hope only becomes visible when we become honest, when we define reality rightly. That hope lies in the person and power of Jesus Christ and in no one else, in no other path or possibility. We call it good news, even though there is nothing new about it, because every new moment, every new problem, every new sin, has already been conquered and forgiven through His suffering and death on our behalf and His resurrection from the dead on that Easter morning two thousand years ago. There is good news for whatever is ailing in your life; good news for whatever challenges confront you tomorrow and next week; good news for every single conceivable human problem we face today. But it is good news that must be delivered and then accepted.

Years after the Second World War was over, there were Japanese soldiers still holed up on the Pacific Islands. No one had gotten them the news of surrender. They could have gone home to be with their families, but the good news had not been delivered. As a matter of fact, when the last aging soldier was finally brought the news, he refused to accept it. He convinced himself that it was only an enemy ploy to make him put down his weapons. Only when his commanding officer was personally brought to the island did the old soldier acknowledge that there was peace and that he no longer had to live in caves or fear the enemy.

Our God came Himself to deliver our good news, to tell us that the war between heaven and humanity was over and that both sides won. He put on flesh and walked among us and then,

before He left, instructed us to keep on bringing that news. The war is over, but the fighting continues in places where the amazing news hasn't penetrated. Isn't that a tragedy? That's why our task is urgent—Satan is racking up victories in a conflict he has already lost. The head of the serpent has been cut off, and the body is writhing in its death pangs.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the last great hope for this world. According to the promise of Jesus, we have been given His power, His presence, and His authority—all we need for success. And the Great Commission is our marching order, the operation on which everything depends. It's time for us to awaken to the urgency, the reality, the simplicity of this one task, an assignment beside which all others pale into insignificant trivia.

Think of the ways we allot our time and energy—our causes, our quests, our dreams, our hobbies, and our pursuits. How much eternal importance is in each one? Are we, like the legendary emperor Nero, fiddling while Rome burns? Jesus told us to seek His kingdom and His righteousness first, and all the other things will follow in their proper place (Matthew 6:33). First? I wonder how many of us are even seeking His kingdom second or third or tenth. How many people do we encounter every day who are dying of thirst for the living water only Christ can provide, but we're too busy to tell them?

Someday I will stand before my Father to account for my actions in this life. Oh, how I long to be able to say, "My Lord and my God, I know You gave me Your greatest gift, so I gave all that I could of my time and resources to do what would please You. In my generation, we fulfilled the Great Commission! We finally enabled every living soul on our planet to hear the message You longed to give them, and we made disciples of every nation."

And it is my deepest prayer that I can hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21, 23 ESV).

A Great Awakening

During these last months, I've felt something change within me, something powerful stirring my soul. I've developed a deep hunger to be about my Father's business of pursuing this mission to our whole world, of carrying out the Great Commission. It's not as if I haven't always been devoted to the task. I've always seen it as the focal point of my personal ministry and all Christian ministry. That passion has been there for me. But lately, that passion has matured. It has taken hold of me from the inside, made me eager, and distracted me from little things that used to seem so important. It's as if all the chaos and clamor of my life have suddenly fallen into place and become one cohesive picture: the image of the Great Commission relentlessly pursued to fruition. I still care about leading my family, leading my church, serving my local community, and all the rest. But these are now like rivulets that lead into the great, raging river that is my charge to take the gospel to the world and see massive, global revival as a result.

What would this world be like if suddenly there was a worldwide harvest? I fall asleep thinking about it, and I wake up with a refreshed vision. In my mind's eye, I see it all as I begin my day—and then I deal with the mundane responsibilities life requires of me. If only I could spend all my time, all my abilities, all my strength on what really matters. I look around and see our streets teeming with people who are consumed by football or politics or Hollywood or Wall Street or the dating scene or the Internet. I understand the lure of all these things. But as for me, I want to trade in my remaining years, months, days, and minutes—God alone knows their count—for the kind of seeds that will take root among people and then blossom in heaven. I now see my moments as currency, and I can spend them on

trash or treasure. I don't want to give any precious resource of this life to that which isn't eternally significant.

For me, that means a laser focus on the Great Commission. I hope you might come to feel the same way. Toward that end, we must learn to define reality, to be honest with ourselves. This book is intended to help you do that. The following principle should help you start down that road.

The Waterline Principle

I don't believe I ended up living in Northwest Arkansas by some random occurrence. When God hands out careers and directs the courses of lives, He is purposeful. In my little corner of the world, there are giants in the land—corporate giants, and three of them. Walmart, J. B. Hunt, and Tyson Foods all have their headquarters in the vicinity. One of those is the world's largest business; another is the largest transportation logistics company of its type in North America; the third is the world's largest poultry and beef producer. Walmart alone is a business magnet, attracting more than twelve hundred other vendors to our region. Most of these national and international companies sell and service their products to Walmart.

Did God have a purpose in placing me in this particular commercial hub? I think He wanted to develop in me a great burden for the businesses of the world, and that's what has happened. A decade ago, when our church was launching a new campus in nearby Pinnacle Hills, I began the Summit Business Persons' Luncheon. We didn't design it as a Bible study, but as a vehicle to minister to the needs of corporate leaders. From the beginning those who came to us tended to be members of the wider community rather than simply our church. We focused on equipping people to do business in the right way. At first I

was the regular speaker, but over the years we've begun to bring in guest leaders of all kinds.

While that ministry has taken on a life of its own, and I may speak there no more than three or four times per year, I've grown too. I find myself reading important books and magazines from the business world, keeping abreast of that culture. I look for new ways to invest in our Summit leaders as well as the many corporate people in our church. The intricacy of corporate culture is one of those things they don't teach you in seminary; God has built into me a great interest in business, which in turn is one of the keys to awakening the Great Commission—because the business of America, the last great empire, is business.

A couple of years ago, I came across a particularly intriguing book: Jim Collins's *How the Mighty Fall: And Why Some Companies Never Give In*. The author really hits the target, illuminating truths that apply not just to businesses but everywhere—including churches, ministries, and denominations. Collins writes about taking risks “below the waterline.” He asks us to imagine being the captain of a ship. Make one bad decision, and you'll blow a hole in the side. If that hole is above the waterline, you have the chance to patch up the hole, learn your lesson, and sail on. But if that hole is below the waterline, you're in big trouble. Water gushes in upon you, and you have to both stop the flood and somehow patch the hole, or you will very soon find yourself on the ocean floor. Great companies, Collins says, don't take risks below the waterline.¹ They know exactly where the impact of a poor decision will be, and they protect what is essential for keeping their heads above water even in risk. I read that passage and underlined it furiously. This writer was talking about defining our reality.

I've counseled people many times and have seen them take terrible risks with their families, their careers, their very souls.

Collins has described what I tried to do—help people see just what would happen if they found the water suddenly rushing in. The problem comes when people won't be honest with themselves. They won't admit exactly where the waterline is. If a man has an affair, that's a below-the-waterline decision for his wife and his children. It will sink the family quickly, no matter how he tries to patch things up later. If a young lady falls in love with a man who doesn't share her faith, she thinks she is well above the waterline, but the opposite is true. If a businessman cashes in his financial reserves to start a business of his own, he'd better have a rock-solid assurance his business will succeed, because those reserves are the waterline for taking care of his family.

What could be more critical to life than simple self-honesty? It's as vital as it is difficult. So how can you make good, above-the-waterline decisions as you define your personal reality?

Three Tough Questions

Being honest with ourselves begins with a willingness to ask the tough questions so we have the opportunity to provide the tough answers. Let's consider some of the questions each of us must ask.

Do I Know Jesus Intimately?

Consider Paul's challenge to the believers in Corinth:

Test yourselves [to see] if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves. Or do you not recognize for yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless you fail the test. (2 Corinthians 13:5)

Paul was responding to a group of complainers who were questioning his credentials as an apostle. He urged them to be

honest with themselves; to step back, look within, and see if there was any sign of Jesus inside. Jesus, of course, would have no part in bickering about Paul's background, or starting church quarrels. Once He has a solid grip on our minds and wills, there is no time for petty squabbles.

Paul's test is still valid. When was the last time you took it? This is serious business because your ultimate waterline is your eternal condition. You wouldn't gamble with your soul, would you? Would you really place your eternal destination at risk? The day will come when it's too late to patch that hole, so you'd better know where you stand.

If you know much about the Christian faith, you'll understand that by virtue of being human, you begin this voyage with a gaping opening in your hull. It can't be repaired by any amount of churchgoing, financial giving, or community service. All of those things are rewarding, but they're only the fruit of a grateful, Spirit-led life. In themselves, they can never wipe away the sin and rebellion in your life. No, we are born with leaky hulls, and the breach grows larger every day. We desperately try to mend them with many other things. But we look closer and see that the hole is in the shape of a cross.

Only Christ, crucified as payment for our sins, can fill the gap. When you realize that, you are ready to bow at the feet of the crucified Jesus and accept the gift He has offered you—the gift of healing, the gift of peace right now, and the gift of a perfect eternal life when this earthly one is over. Once He has fixed that gaping fracture, it stays fixed. Nothing in heaven or earth can sink the ship. It will sail you to a new life and a heavenly destiny.

I'm sure you realize that many, many more people identify with Christianity than actually follow Christ. People go to church for a lot of reasons. For some of us, the reason is that Christ is everything to us. Knowing and serving Him make life

worth living, and we are dead serious about being closer to Jesus tomorrow than we are today. But I'm sure you know people, as I do, for whom the adjective *Christian* is just another designation, such as *brown-haired*, *left-handed*, or *American*. Being a Christian is one more identifying trait in a crowded life.

Look again at the question I've posed—Do I know Jesus intimately?—and think about how you would honestly answer it. Take your time—you'll never answer a more important question.

You see, we're talking about the Great Commission. How can someone have a passion for obeying it if he or she hasn't fully internalized its message? What if I asked you to tell people all over town about a new restaurant when you had never dined there? You wouldn't be so excited about that subject, and frankly, you wouldn't be a very effective spokesperson. But if you had been there, enjoyed the specialty of the house, and knew it was the greatest meal of your life—so fantastic you would never want to dine anywhere else, for any meal—then no one could stop you from telling your friends about that place.

If you've truly tasted of the Bread of Life, if you've sipped from living waters that well up to eternal joy, there is absolutely no way you can live without telling others about it. You want everyone to have a chance to sit at that table, even people you don't know—people across the country or across the world. That's why the Great Commission is my passion, and why it should be yours.

Do I Love Jesus Passionately?

I was a college student when I met Jeana, the woman who became my wife. It didn't take long for me to be drawn to her powerfully. I fell head over heels in love, and I organized my life around that relationship. I rearranged my schedule, cut out lesser things in order to spend more time with the woman I

loved, and sat up nights figuring out ways to show her how much I cared. No doubt about it: I was *passionate*.

Maybe you've been there. There's something incredibly wonderful about having your life become a nonstop honeymoon. And of course, like most other couples, we progressed to new stages of our relationship. We didn't fall out of love; we didn't start taking each other for granted. But no one can stay giddy and love-struck forever—nothing would ever get done in the world! Maybe we don't offer as many silly, Hallmark gestures of our affection as two nineteen-year-olds might do, but we do enjoy a deeper, fuller partnership in our marriage. We know each other's thoughts, finish each other's sentences, and complement each other with the gifts we each have. That's a pretty wonderful thing too. But our relationship is not all business as usual; it would be sad if we let that happen. Whenever we get the chance, we take off on trips together to rekindle our romance. We work to stoke the passion between us.

Romance and spiritual devotion are different varieties of love, but there are strong similarities between them. Jesus underlined this concept in the book of Revelation, when He was speaking to the church in Ephesus. He began by commending the Ephesians. He told them there were many things they were doing right, but an essential ingredient was missing: "I have this against you: you have abandoned the love [you had] at first" (Revelation 2:4).

He is talking about the love those believers had for Him. Somehow, amid all the great works and ministries the Ephesians were performing, they had lost their passion for the One they were serving. They had created a busy church, but one that lacked its first love of Christ.

The good news, He told them, was that what they had lost could still be found. "Remember then how far you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first" (Revelation 2:5).

That verse offers a three-step plan to falling in love with Christ again:

1. *Remember.* He tells them to measure the depth between where they are now in their love and where they once were, to take a trip down memory lane and feel what has been lost.
2. *Repent.* Neglecting Christ is, to put it simply, sin. Renounce it; make a fresh start. Commit to remain close to Christ and to let nothing get in the way.
3. *Repeat* the things you used to do. In a marriage, this would mean getting back to the time you spent together. It would mean talking more, listening more. With Christ, it's much the same. Start spending more time in prayer, in study of His Word, and in serving others in His name, as perhaps you once did.

Remember. Repent. Repeat. Sounds like a plan, doesn't it? It's a path of restoration to the Christ-centered life. If you do those things, you'll find yourself rediscovering your passion for the Lord, who has such a passion for you. Jesus didn't offer this to the Ephesians as a viable option among many. He told them that if they fail to love Him as they were created to do, then He will judge them for it. A deep love for Christ isn't just a good idea—it's the only thing that makes life work.

I can tell you from my own life that it's all too easy to lose that early passion for Christ. As a new Christian, I couldn't get enough of the Lord. I was constantly found in prayer and regularly immersed in the Scriptures, soaking them up for all they were worth. I was powerfully drawn to the church, where I could be with His other children and we could minister to one another. At some point along the way, however, it all became habit—something I did

in the same way I'd shower or brush my teeth. There were times when I had an elevated passion for things that matter to God—say, speaking out against cultural and national sin, or pursuing spiritual programs and movements. But I didn't realize the difference between devotion to His work and devotion to *Him*.

It's a massive difference, that of love versus legalism. I cared about building a growing church, and that was something He wanted. But first He wanted *me*. I cared about mission work, and so does He—but His mission to *me* is the starting point from which all my service must be launched.

I've often had an "Ephesus moment" and realized how far I had fallen. Then, under the loving, comforting guidance of the Holy Spirit—He is never an accuser, but always a loving agent of restoration—I have repented and returned to the things that deepened our relationship. To love Christ passionately is to love Him uniquely, to hold Him above everyone and everything else. It is to grow more like Him every day, so that His values become my values. That means beginning to love people the way I see Jesus love them in the Gospels—humbly, sacrificially, and all-inclusively, so that it's possible to care for people on the other side of the world. Loving Christ passionately is a point from which all roads lead to the Great Commission.

Our last great hope is to rekindle a fully inflamed passion for Jesus Christ, leading to a renewed, all-hands-on-deck urgency to reach His world.

Do I Share Jesus Constantly?

The Great Commission is ultimately a Grave Commitment. It recognizes that our world is in peril, with people perishing every day without a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. We commit our lives to rescuing as many as we can, as quickly as we can, wherever we can.

We've been thinking about knowing and loving Christ. Now, as we raise the subject of sharing Him, we realize that we can't separate any one of these pursuits from the other two. To know Christ is to love Him; to love Him is to share Him. We want everyone to experience what we have experienced. We want it because we are obedient, because it's natural to share what is wonderful with others, and because those others face an alternative that is terrible beyond imagining.

Authentic faith, then, doesn't come in various sizes. It can't be customized to our preferences. To know Jesus—to really know Jesus and not just to play the game—is to know Him ever more intimately, to love Him ever more deeply, and to follow Him to the ends of the earth and the ends of our lives in obedience to His message. You can't be “sort of” Christian any more than you can be “sort of” pregnant. Once you set out to follow someone, you go where he goes. You walk at his speed.

We look around and realize just how much the world needs this message. It is our task to go to our neighborhood, our region, our nation, and our world in the pattern Jesus set out for us in Acts 1:8. When I listen to Christians speak as if this is the work of “specialists” called missionaries, my heart aches. When someone says, “Don't we have plenty of needs to meet close to home, before we start talking about some country overseas?” I shake my head in sadness, realizing these people have somehow missed the heart of the gospel. Is breathing a task we leave to special people? Is eating? Sharing the gospel globally is as central to our discipleship identity as breathing is to our human identity.

This is another tough truth, and it must be faced. The Christian who is apathetic about the Great Commission is the one who is not walking at Jesus' speed, who has fallen far behind, or who is wandering somewhere in the woods. But if Christ is our guide, the Great Commission is our compass. To

know Him is to love Him, to feel an increasing desire to please Him, and finally to realize what it is that He wants from us more than anything else: to share Him with His lost children.

I study the history of Christianity and find one story after another in which this has happened. The young believer starts out simply loving the Lord, and this love inevitably leads the believer to say, “What do you want me to do, O God?” And God’s answer is always the same: *Go—find them and bring them to Me! They’re lost, they’re dying of their hurts, and they need Me just as you do.* For two thousand years, truly godly men and women have stepped forward, been honest with themselves, and come to the conclusion that what God wanted was for them to take the gospel everywhere and to make disciples.

But you say your burden is for your own neck of the woods? That’s a start; it could be that you have a special calling to your community. But keep this in mind: a Jewish man first shared the gospel in Rome; a Roman took it to France; a Frenchman took it to Scandinavia; a Scandinavian to Ireland; an Irishman to Scotland. Every nation where the gospel has been preached had someone travel there from abroad. We serve a God who loves busting borders and knocking down walls. It brings Him great joy when we reach to each other across the distinctions that usually divide us.

Ultimately, whoever you are and wherever you are, it comes down to being honest with yourself. If you are a member of the human race, you must realize you are fallen and can’t overcome your sin. Once you realize that, you must be honest enough to acknowledge your need for forgiveness through Christ Jesus. Then, as you begin to follow Him, you will find you must be honest enough to assess your devotion to Him—you’ll realize you can never know Him too deeply, never love Him too passionately. And that realization will lead you inevitably to caring about the Great Commission.

When that happens, my friend, the details of your life will fall into place. You'll be amazed how much of God you experience when you give yourself to the things that He cares about. Ask anyone who has ever taken a mission trip; traveling somewhere to serve Him puts your life in a brand-new perspective. Things that seemed so important in your daily life suddenly become insignificant. You're dealing with the destiny of souls now. You're working to enlarge the size of heaven! There is a joy you couldn't have imagined, because you've aligned yourself with the Author of all joy. You will see your family differently. "How can we work together to support the Great Commission?" you'll ask. "Maybe that trip to the beach would be better used on a mission field." You will see your resources differently. *What could I give up, you will wonder, so that I could support our friends who are winning people to the Lord?* Never again will you want to simply indulge in your own pleasure—you'll know the joy of returning to God what has always been His. And you will see your church family differently. *We need to send more people on short-term mission projects, you'll realize. And we need to help young people realize their calling into career service for God.* You will find yourself stepping forward as a Great Commission encourager, a recruiter and enlister for the army He is raising up. Sooner or later, someone is going to come up to you and say, "You know what? You are *obsessed* with the Great Commission!" And you'll just smile and say, "I know, I know. And I've never been happier. Never been more focused or energetic."

It's time for the days of the Great Omission to end and for us to put aside all the trivia and be about our Father's business. It's simply a matter of self-honesty. It's also a matter of joy, excitement, passion, and adventure.

Do you feel that stirring in your soul? God is moving among

us; I sense it. The needs are so great, and He may be returning soon.

For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to show Himself strong for those whose hearts are completely His. (2 Chronicles 16:9)

Do you feel His eyes upon you? Do you sense Him sifting your heart to see if it is completely His? Give yourself to Him, this verse tells us, and He will give you His strength. He will show Himself strong in your life, in every way. The adventure will begin.

Then, when this life is over and you cross the border that separates this world from the next, you will be greeted by many, many people. “You don’t know me,” some stranger will say. “But I heard the gospel because of you, and now I’m here. I’ve waited here by the gate to thank you.” Others will run forward to embrace you, to tell you their stories, and to describe how their eternal destinies were changed forever because of God’s power and your obedience. Then one more hand will fall upon your shoulder. You will look at it closely and see the nail marks in it. You will feel the radiance of a smile more powerful than all the suns and stars.

Can you imagine anything more satisfying? Is there any possible reason you wouldn’t covet a future like this one? Give up your small ambitions. Be honest with yourself, and choose the future God designed you to live.

The Situation Room

Every pastor has his own pre-worship tradition. A soldier may listen to a special song to help him “get in the zone,” or he may strap on his gear in a certain ritualistic way. But the pastor isn’t superstitious; he is interested in the zone of special intimacy with God that will help him become the best possible vessel of service to his people that morning. The pastor’s study is his “situation room,” the place where he seeks his final marching orders before going into spiritual battle. The young pastor may scan his notes, cramming as if it’s exam time back in seminary. But as wisdom grows through the years, he finds that prayer is what he really needs. As deeper wisdom comes, he finds ways to enhance that prayer—to be deliberate in the way he comes before the Father, that he may go before the church.

Fifteen years ago, I began to pray through Matthew 28:19-20, asking God to help me preach and lead with the authority mentioned in the Great Commission. I had these verses stenciled on one wall of my office—I had long since memorized them, but I never wanted them to be out of my sight. I would look at those verses on Sunday morning and pray them with all my heart. I didn’t want to become inwardly directed, caring only about the members of my own church. On Sunday morning, it’s so easy to be consumed by their needs alone. I understood the power of claiming God’s promises, so I also took Psalm 2:8 as my own:

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Ask of Me,

and I will make the nations Your inheritance
and the ends of the earth Your possession.

I asked, “Lord, give me these people. Put the world on my heart. We claim these nations for Jesus Christ!”

I would then turn to praying for my church. Our congregational mission statement, which speaks of reaching Northwest Arkansas and the world, was stenciled on another office wall. I recommitted myself each week to fulfilling that statement in God’s power.

On yet another wall, there was a world map. I would then turn to those lands and seas. *There they are*, I thought. *All the lost people who need the gospel shared with them, all the nations where we must go and make disciples.* The map became part of my Sunday morning prayer agenda. It made the Great Commission visual for me.

Pacing the office, praying on my feet, my steps would bring me to a bronze sculpture of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. It spoke to me and found its way into my dialogue with God. “Fill me with humility like this, Lord Jesus. Every knee bows before You, and yet You bow to scrub dirty feet. Every tongue confesses that You are Lord, and yet Your own tongue poured out love and truth for us.” Then I would walk over to a picture of my family, the people I love the most deeply in this world. How could I not pray for them—and for all the other families they represented? “Help me to reach families today, dear Lord. Help me connect with them and take them to Jesus.” I would come to another little sculpture in my office: a Native American on a horse. I loved the dynamic motion of that hunter, leaning forward with his spear as

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he galloped, claiming prey to feed his family. He came to represent, for me, the many kinds of faces and world-views out there in the world, the people groups I wouldn't see in our worship center. "God, give me the ability and the opportunity to reach the many beautiful varieties of your children. Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in Your sight. Help me to reach the ethnic groups of the world."

And then, the globe. It was special to me, too, because it came from Israel. I would return to the Great Commission, where all roads, all avenues of thought and prayer, led for me. I loved the feel of it in my hands as I spun it slowly, letting my fingers glide across Africa and Europe and Asia. I would ask God to show me a nation, show me a continent I might pray for at that moment. As He did, I would place my hand over that portion of the globe and bring it before God. I was struck by the human impossibility of the Great Commission each time I prayed over the globe, but impossible achievements are how God is glorified. "Help me find a way, Lord. Create the medium, the format, that opens that door."

Next, I would focus on the pictures on my wall—photographs of important people for whom I needed to intercede: a picture of George W. Bush was there; after 2008, a souvenir from President Obama's inauguration, given to me by an African-American pastor friend, appeared. It wasn't about whether I bought into their political views, but about the Bible's admonition for me to respect my leaders, submit to them in Christian citizenship, and especially pray for them. I also prayed for such strategic people as James and Shirley Dobson, whose pictures I kept there. "Help me influence and invest in our

leaders, O God—political leaders, religious leaders, and international leaders—for the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

I would then be ready to walk out the door of my office and join those special men who would pray over me before each service. Those men know how to talk to God, and it was good to bathe in their intercessory prayers for me.

This all became a kind of ritual, but in the best and most powerful sense. It enlarged my vision. While the office décor and the circle of leaders remained, I found that my heart was changing. As I prayed, “Give me the world,” I heard and felt a new, recurring whisper:

Ronnie. You can't do it by yourself.

“Well, of course not, Lord, but—”

Ronnie. You can't do it by yourself.

Ten minutes before time for worship, a pastor doesn't want to be wrestling with God. But many times it happens exactly that way—because ten minutes before worship, God tends to have a pastor's undivided attention.

I listened, and during January 2008, my personal mission statement began to change. The new one took me off center stage: “My personal mission is to influence and invest in others to win the world to Christ.” In the situation room, the battle was the same one Christians have been fighting for twenty centuries. But this soldier began thinking less in terms of his own movements and more in terms of the army around him.

Once I redirected my prayer on the basis of that change, things began to happen immediately. It's shocking how one puzzle piece can change an entire picture. It's not as if I'd been praying wrongly or without fruit. But if God's Word is the “sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17),

I had sharpened my weapon. I had gotten closer to the plan He has had all along, and I began to feel Him behind my shoulder, saying, “Now we’re getting somewhere, My child!”

In June 2009, I was asked to serve as chairman of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Great Commission Resurgence Task Force. One Sunday morning, I was moving through my normal prayer and had come to that *National Geographic* world map. I sensed the Lord speaking to me in my heart, saying, *Ronnie, I am answering your prayer for the nations. What you are doing right now with the Great Commission will affect future generations by placing more missionaries around the world, raising more dollars for the gospel, and equipping more ministers and missionaries than at any time in history.*

Talk about an affirmation! I’ve already detailed how my world was rocked by what we discovered in that group. What you’re holding in your hands, as a matter of fact, is a part of God’s answer to my prayer—this book.

And then, something else—something that brought a special smile to my face, one of those fingerprints-of-God moments. I was asked if our church could host a North American Leader’s Summit on reaching Native Americans for Christ. I looked at the figure on horseback in my office, and I thanked God for being so good, so faithful—for being always “on the hunt,” just like the bronze figure in my office.

I treated myself to a little victory lap around my four walls and all my visual reminders, thanking God all along the way. No, the job was not yet done. The greatest challenges of telling everyone in the world about Jesus and of making disciples of all the nations still lie before us.

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But no longer did it seem impossible. God had shown me that the world is really a collection of thousands of people groups—groups such as the one represented by this hunter—and that a vast army of believers is better than one hard-praying soldier. Army by army, and people group by people group, we can win them.

I had asked to be an influencer, an investor in others; and God was giving me all I could handle in answer to that prayer—just as if He'd been waiting for years for me to ask. I was praying more specifically now: to mobilize people, churches, groups, missions, dollars; to reach this people group, that one, groups yet undiscovered.

And the Spirit of God was on the move. Whole new avenues and strategies and formats were opening up every day, across North America and the world.

The situation room was buzzing, and one prayer warrior was finally moving to the front line.