

## **Building a God-Centered Church**

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**Rich Nathan**

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**John: Building A Community of Hope in a World of Despair Series**

**John 17:1-5**

I've been doing a series from the gospel of John. And as we approach the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of the gospel of John, I would like to spend the next couple of months deeply meditating on the meaning of this chapter because I think it has enormous implications for our church and our church's future as well as for our world. So, I'm going to take a kind of parenthesis from our series and spend the autumn considering the kind of church that Jesus prayed for, died for, and is coming back for.

People ask all the time what is the vision of Vineyard Columbus. What kind of a church are you trying to build? John 17 gives us the biblical foundation not only for our church, but for every church in the world.

Now the words of John 17 were spoken on the night before Jesus was crucified. We've taken a lot of time to consider the night before Christ's crucifixion. John 13-16 is all about the night of Christ's betrayal and the night of the Last Supper. One of the things we've discovered regarding this very last night of Christ, before he went to his death, is that Christ communicates to his disciples and to us those things that are most important to him. I've quoted the old saying several times to you that "last words are lasting words." We find Jesus communicating to his disciples the things that are most essential to his purpose in coming.

Jesus talks with his disciples about the nature of God as a triune being — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He talks to his disciples about his relationship with the Father. He tells the disciples most clearly who he is and how they can have eternal life. He talks to his followers about answers to prayer and the provision he gives of the Holy Spirit.

We've seen that one of the dominant themes that runs through Jesus' teaching on his last night before he was nailed to a cross is the danger the disciples would face from the world. The backdrop for the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of John is the repeated idea that the disciple's life is always lived in the context of extreme opposition from the world. Over and over again Jesus tells his followers to not expect that following him in this world will be easy, painless, or effortless. He predicts for his disciples great difficulty, struggle, and pain in working out their Christian lives in a world that is hostile to God and hostile to all of God's ways. The bottom line is, the Christian life is hard.

I've spoken to you about some of the ways that we see the mindset of our unredeemed, unsaved world working out its hostility to God in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. I've said you see the hostility to God in our 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to sexuality, in the breakdown of our families, in education, in media, in consumerism and materialism. If you consider yourself to be a follower of Christ, do you regularly find yourself having to fight a pitched battle with the currents of this world that oppose God?

Over the past week I was away from Columbus because of my involvement in some conferences. While I was away I stayed in a hotel room on the road alone for several nights. One of the first things I need to do as a man when I get to a hotel room is

block certain stations from coming into my room. I either do it by the remote control, or I call down to the front desk to make sure that various stations don't come into my room so that as I'm flipping through the TV channels, I'm not assaulted by images that I don't want washing over me.

In a thousand ways at work, in a classroom, on the road, in your family, do you not find yourself, as a follower of Christ, constantly pummeled, always having to defend, guard and shield yourself in order to maintain the purity of your own heart and the hearts of your family members?

I borrowed this series title, "Building a Community of Hope in a World of Despair" from the title of Vineyard's National Pastors' Conference from this past July. I thought it was such an appropriate title for John 17. Peter Brown, a historian, made an interesting observation regarding why Christianity spread so rapidly during the days of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. Brown said the appeal of Christianity lay in its radical sense of community. It absorbed people because the individual could drop from a dangerous impersonal world into a miniature community of love and care. Brown writes,

The Christian community suddenly came to appeal to men and women who felt deserted. During a time of inflation, Christians invested large sums of liquid capital in people. During a time on increased brutality, the courage of Christian martyrs was impressive. During public emergencies, such as plagues or rioting, the Christian clergy were shown to be the only united group in town able to look after the burial of the dead and to organize food supplies. [He concludes] Plainly to be a Christian in the year 250 or 300 AD brought more protection from one's fellow man than to be a Roman citizen.

Today the church is a community of hope in the despairing world of Sub-Saharan Africa. In Sub-Saharan Africa the world is characterized by death and family devastation due to a massive AIDS epidemic. In some countries, more than a quarter of all adults are infected with the AIDS virus. There are millions and millions of children orphaned because both father and mother have died of AIDS. It is creating not only a massive health and family crisis, AIDS is creating a massive economic crisis as entire populations of young men and women, the backbone of any economy, are either sick or dead.

In Sub-Saharan Africa the church is the only community of hope. It is not an addition, a nice extra, to an otherwise happy life. Coming into the church is necessary in Sub-Saharan Africa in order to preserve one's life. Only as people practice Christian principles of total sexual abstinence, or life-long committed sexual faithfulness in marriage, are people being protected from the ravages of AIDS. It is the church alone that is caring for AIDS orphans. It is the church that is caring for and ministering to adults with AIDS.

In South America Harvey Cox writes in his book, *Fire From Heaven*, that the only thriving human communities in the vast sea of tarpaper shanties and cardboard huts that surround these massive, impoverished South American cities, the only thriving human community is the church. In places where people are literally living on garbage dumps, and everyone is scrounging and fighting just for survival, the only beacon of hope in much of South America is the church.

And what about here in 21<sup>st</sup> century America? Where, other than in the church, are we going to find hope in a world characterized by terrorism, nuclear threats, family breakdowns, epidemic divorce rates, AIDS, sexual distortions, and violence in our cities? Where are we going to find a viable community of people who will assist us and our children in living well in this hostile world apart from the church? More and more in America, church is not a nice extra to one's already happy and fulfilled life. It is a necessity, as it was in ancient Rome, and as it is now in Sub-Saharan Africa and South America, and in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. You cannot have hope or live well apart from Christian community and apart from the church.

In John 17 Jesus doesn't say that any institution that puts "church" on its sign or a cross on its building will automatically become a community of hope in a despairing world. It is not enough for the institution to be listed in the yellow pages under the "church" section to become a community of hope. In the next couple of months, we will go through John 17 and we're going to find some of the features that mark out these communities of hope, these beacons of light, these refuges and sanctuaries in a world of despair.

The most fundamental feature of a community of hope is that it will be God-centered. And so I've called this first talk in our series from John 17, *Building a God-Centered Church*. Let's pray.

As we read through the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of the gospel of John, we find that these communities of hope must be committed to the entire will of God as expressed by the phrase “the Kingdom of God.” The Kingdom of God is the fullness of God’s will in this world. One of the tremendous challenges of trying to do church in 21<sup>st</sup> century America is the fact that everyone expects you to label yourself as one thing or another. Are you a charismatic or evangelical? Are you into building intimate community among your members, or are you outreach focused?

What is your niche? That’s what people in America think about church. They think about it entirely in market-driven terms. What niche does your church occupy in the church market? People are always asking these types of questions of me as a pastor. Is your church seeker-friendly, or is it for Christians? In your preaching, Rich, do you take a discipling approach, or are you aiming at evangelism? Is your church involved in passionate worship, or are you trying to aim at the unchurched? Are you aiming at the top of the economic spectrum, or at the bottom? Is your church for the professionals, or is it for the homeless?

And every time someone asks me one of these niche kinds of questions – are you into this or that alternative – I just want to say, “yes.” What do you mean yes? It’s either/or. You are either reaching people at the top of the economic spectrum, or at the bottom. Church is either aimed at suburban people or urban people. Tell us what your niche is. Tell us how you label yourself so that we can pigeonhole you.

And I always want to respond, the Bible doesn't offer us the choice to be a niche church. Our church is committed to be the people of God's kingdom going after the whole will of God in the world. A community of hope must reach the up-and-outers and the down-and-outers. I want to reach people who have all the stuff but are empty inside. I want to reach people who have an ache in their souls that is worse than any toothache or any backache because they think that they should be happy since they've done everything they're supposed to do. They've gotten every degree and professional success, every toy that you can have, and yet they recognize that there is something missing.

Let me tell you about an Australian friend of mine, who I will call "Devon," who came to our church 8 months ago. Devon was finishing up his post-doctorial work in one of the sciences at OSU. He was dating a Christian woman who sometimes came to our church. Although Devon was a complete atheist, the Christian woman he was dating dragged him to our church back in January.

After the service I was introduced to Devon. He told me a bit about himself. He said, "You know, I've been to church I think only once or perhaps twice in my life when I lived in Australia. That was when I was a small child. I really don't know anything about Christianity. In fact, I know absolutely nothing about the Bible. I've never read the book of John, or even the book of Paul."

So I said, "Well, Devon, I'd love to make myself available to you as you begin to investigate Christianity. Let me give you my email address. I'd love to dialogue with

you about questions, or issues that you may have as you begin to look into Christianity.”

He said, “OK,” and actually emailed me. We struck up this wonderful email dialogue. We probably wrote back and forth once or twice a week over the next several months. And Devon began attending church and started listening to my messages. The spectacular thing was that God began to kick in Devon’s worldview. A number of people were praying for Devon. He had different friends sharing with him. He was listening to the teachings and dialoguing with me.

We got together after several months and Devon said, “It’s the weirdest thing, Rich, but I’m beginning to be open to the possibility that there may be, indeed, a God. I’ve even tried a little experiment that you guys call prayer. I’m the kind of guy that when the police pull me over, I always get a ticket. I’ve known lots of people who can talk their way out of getting tickets, but I never can. In fact, I’m the sort of guy they tell to step out of the car and spread ‘em.”

“So, the other day I see an officer flashing his lights in back of me. He pulled me over. I knew I was speeding. Before the officer got to my car, I decided to do what you Christians do. I decided to pray. I said, ‘God, if you are there, help me get out of this.’ Well, the officer came up and told me I was speeding. I said yes, I knew that I was. The officer smiled and said, ‘Well, just watch your speed. I’ll let you off with a warning. Have a good day.’”



Devon said, “I sat there and I thought that in the past I would’ve written this off to coincidence. But I’ve been trying this little experiment of prayer and I’m beginning to wonder whether, in fact, there really is someone who is answering. In fact, it’s the oddest thing, but I’m starting to call into question all of the things that I believed about everything. Every one of my thoughts that I used to think were true are being called into question. What do you think, Rich?”

I said, “Devon, I think you are beginning to meet God. If you do, indeed, meet God, he will challenge every one of your thoughts.”

Devon continued to come to church and we continued our email dialogue. We met together a couple more times. Right before he left to take an assistant professor’s position at another university, Devon came into my office to say goodbye. We chatted for about 20 minutes and then I sat back and watched Devon talk himself into becoming a Christian. It was one of the most amazing things that I’ve had the privilege of watching. I sat there sort of as a consultant, chirping some of the things he was saying back to him, offering him a little reflective listening. The whole time I knew that I was watching a spiritual birth. God was at work.

When God is truly at work at someone’s conversion, a Christian is there merely to be a mid-wife or obstetrician. We don’t produce the baby. We don’t form the baby, or try to produce a premature birth. We are just there to assist in the delivery.

At one point in the conversation, Devon said, “You know, I think I need to do something with what I now believe about Christ.”

I said, “You’re right. You do need to do something.”

He sat back in the chair for a long while and then he said, “If I commit myself to Christ, that means I’m going to have to tell my parents that I’ve done this, doesn’t it?”

I said, “That’s right. You are going to have to tell your parents and everyone else who is important in your life.”

He literally bent over in his chair and grabbed his head and shook it as he contemplated what that meant. He sat up and he said, “OK.” He sat for a while and then he said, “If I do this, that means I can’t have sex outside of marriage.”

I said, “That’s right. You are going to have to utterly abstain from sex until marriage.”

He bent over in his chair and shook his head for a while as he contemplated the implications of that. He sat up and said, “OK.” And he continued with the process through five or six other implications of what it meant for him to become a Christian. Finally, he said, “Let’s do it.”

And so we did it. We sat in my office and he acknowledged his sin to God, how he had spent his whole life with the doors slammed in God’s face. He said that as much

as could, he believed Christ was real. That he did, indeed, die for his sins at the cross. And that he did rise from the dead and was alive and could hear his prayers. In my office Devon decided to unbolt the door of his heart and welcome Christ to come in to take control of him. He told Jesus Christ that he wanted to enlist and become one of his followers.

I love watching up-and-outers come to Christ. And I also love watching down-and-outers come to Christ. I love the fact that every Sunday morning we have a couple dozen homeless men and women attending our church, getting saved. 8-10 have come off the streets and now have permanent homes and are working. They've been freed up from different addictions.

A month ago two guys were sitting outside of our Free Medical Clinic. The clinic's director, Kay Wilhelm, came outside and saw the two guys there. She talked with them a while and asked them if they wanted to come, if they needed any help. One of the guys walked away, but the other guy came in. I think he got some medical help. Most importantly, he and Kay sat down and talked. He had experienced great difficulty in life and personal failure, along with some family breakdowns. Kay asked him if he wanted to receive Christ. There in the medical clinic that evening, this guy broke down and invited Christ into his life. Just like Devon did, he asked Christ to take control of his life.

A week later another man came into the clinic to talk with Kay. The man said to Kay, "Do you remember who I am?" Kay said, "You look familiar, but you'll need to remind

me because we have so many clients here.” The man said, “I was the guy who walked away last week. You prayed with my friend to receive Christ. I walked away.”

Kay said, “How is your friend doing?”

The man said, “He’s doing wonderfully. His whole life has changed. For the first time in his life, he is truly happy.”

Kay said, “Do you want what he has?”

The man said, “Oh yes, that’s what I want. That’s what I’ve come back for.” So they knelt down together and this other man received Christ.

I love the fact that we have a church that reaches down-and-outers, the destitute, people who are in pain, folks who are coming here who have gone through divorce or separation, people who are grieving the loss of a romance, folks who are coming here because they have problems with the law, problems with their finances. I talk to people all the time that are coming here who have unhealed issues of sexual abuse or molestation. People come to our church with addictions to pornography, substance abuse, eating disorders, and homosexuality.

The Bible does not allow us the opportunity to choose one type of person or another. Communities of hope are going to reach all kinds of people. Communities of hope who hold to the message of the kingdom are not going to choose between

evangelism and social justice. This church is radically committed to lead people to Christ. And it is also radically committed to meet people's practical needs.

We have a free medical clinic. Recently, by God's grace, at our medical clinic we had donated to us a couple of dentist chairs and we have some dentists from our congregation providing free dental care. Some impoverished folks who simply can't afford to have their teeth fixed, who simply have no access to dental care, came to the clinic a couple of weeks ago. One of our dentists spent hours working on the teeth of one woman. She came in and her teeth were rotted out. After hours of working on her teeth, she got together with our medical director who had her look in the mirror to see what her new teeth looked like. The woman began to cry. The medical director said, "What's wrong? Don't you like how your teeth look?"

She said, "I love them. I haven't smiled in years because I've been too embarrassed to smile because of my teeth." A few weeks later she wrote to the medical director and she said, "I walk around smiling all the time. And by the way, I just got a job. I've been unemployed for years because I was too ashamed of what my teeth looked like. But now that I've gotten my teeth fixed, I've gone out and gotten myself a job."

Communities of hope, who are focused on the message of the kingdom, are not going to choose between evangelism and social justice. I love it when people say to me, "Who are you guys? You are charismatic, but you are so different than the charismatic churches I've visited in the past. You believe in spiritual gifts, but you aren't weird. You are charismatic, but you, as a pastor, don't do all the ministry. You

release ministry to the people and regular people seem to be involved at your church. You guys passionately worship. For a big church, worship is so simple here. It doesn't seem to be a big production. Who are you guys? Your church seems to be everywhere in the city. Your church is involved politically, but you are not part of the Christian right."

A few months ago I sat down with a young couple who were planting a church in Australia. They asked, "Rich, how do you hold together ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit and sensitivity to guests? How do you grow people deep and also reach out for more?"

I said to them, "Guys, I love the fact that you are asking these types of questions, because these are the questions that you should be asking about your ministry for the rest of your lives."

I love the challenge of staying on the tightrope. I love the tension. I love the 19<sup>th</sup> century pastor, Charles Simeon's statement about always trying to hold on to both extremes at the same time. I'm not interested in watered down balance. I want radical extremes in both directions all the time. I love wrestling with the question of how do we welcome gay people into our church and communicate true love and dignity without affirming the gay lifestyle. I love wrestling with how to communicate redemption and hope to divorced people, and yet also regularly communicating the devastating affects of breaking a marriage covenant on the couple themselves and

upon their children. I love not choosing between the righteousness of God and the kindness of God. I love not being a niche church.

People say, “Rich, what is your vision for the Columbus Vineyard?”

Let me tell you what the vision is. The vision of this church is to do and to believe everything that the Bible tells the church to do and believe. We want to do it all. I want a church that runs on all 8 cylinders.

I don’t believe in a niche church. The vision is the vision of the Kingdom—God’s whole will done in this church. I don’t believe in just a healing church. I don’t believe in just a multimedia church. I want to grow the biggest church possible in the city of Columbus and reach literally tens of thousands of people who are within driving distance of the church with the gospel. And I also want to plant let’s say 100 churches in the next 20 years. And I want to send out dozens of missionaries all over the world.

Don’t you want that? Don’t you want to participate in a church that runs on all 8 cylinders, and not just 1-2 cylinders? This is a great place to listen to preaching, or a great place to worship. I want to pastor a church that not only evangelizes, but is also involved in the great social justice issues of our city. I want to pastor a church that is not just ministering to one type of person, but I want to pastor a church that is racially diverse and is involved in racial reconciliation. I want to pastor a church that pushes both extremes all the time, that doesn’t cut the tensions. I want to pastor a

church that does everything with great passion, great intelligence, and great integrity.  
I want us to hold to the message of the Kingdom of God.

Now, what's going to hold all of these things together? What is the orienting principle around which we can build a church that does it all?

## **SLIDE**

*John 17:1-5, After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life; that you they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."*

The prayer that we read in John 17 tells us what Jesus is passionate about. And at the foundation of Jesus' passion is the glory of God. *Father the time [or the hour] has come, glorify your Son that your Son may glorify you.*

## **SLIDE:**

*In v. 4, I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. Now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.*



**SLIDE:**

**And look to verse 24: *Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you love me before the creation of the world.***

What is Jesus passionate about? He is passionate about the glory of God and his own glory. With his work on earth nearing completion, Jesus turns his attention to the subject of glory. God the Son had wonderful glory before he took to himself humanity as the God-Man Jesus Christ.

When we read in v. 5: *And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began*, Jesus is thinking of his prior glory and he is anticipating his ascension into heaven and the resumption of the glory he had before creation.

What is he talking about by “glory” and “glorify”? When you think of the glory of God, which is a very big idea, at least a part of the image you ought to have in your mind is a story that takes place in the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Matthew, which we call the “transfiguration of Jesus.” In Matthew 17 we read these words:

**SLIDE:**

***After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John, the brother of James, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light.***

Jesus is permitting his disciples to see for just a little while his divine nature that was cloaked, uncovered by his humanity. When you think of the glory of God the Son you should think of the vision that the apostle John had of him in the book of Revelation where we read in Rev. 1:16:

**SLIDE:**

***His face was like the sun shining is all of its brilliance.***

Have you ever watched the sun rise over the ocean on a cloudless day or seen the sun over a river or lake on a cloudless day, shining so bright that you can barely look at it for even a second or two without shielding your eyes, and so bright that to look at it for very long would cause you to go blind?

Part of the purpose of the Incarnation, God the Son taking on humanity, is to offer human beings the ability to see the glory of God without going blind. The humanity of Jesus was like sunglasses enabling us to look into the face of the glory of God without losing our sight.

The passion of Jesus was to reveal the glory of God, to show us God's true nature, what God is like in his essential being. That's what it says in John 1:14,

**SLIDE:**

***The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only who came from the Father full of grace and truth.***

Why did the Word become flesh? Why did God the Son become incarnate and take on humanity? He did it so that we could see the glory of God. We read in John 1:18 that no one has ever seen God. You can't see God and live. You can't see God without going blind. *...But God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.*

The passion of Christ is to get people in touch with the glory of God, to communicate the nature of God, and to get people centered on God. And what do you think is the purpose of life and the purpose of the church? Simply put, the purpose of life and the purpose of the church is to exchange the false center around which people organize their lives for a true center in God.

Let's think about this for a moment. The key to church, indeed the key to life, is to figure out what to organize a life or the church around. When we organize our lives around the wrong center, spiritual disaster happens to human beings, and spiritual disaster happens to a church. For example, there are many mothers who organize their lives around their children. Loving your children and valuing your calling as a mother is a good thing. When your children become the center of your life, you are headed for spiritual disaster.

I've seen this over and over again. Mom has a child who is rebellious, or experiences an empty nest, or God-forbid has a child who dies. I've watched moms crash and burn.

Many men and women organize their lives around their jobs. The company is sold or reorganized and that man or woman is laid off. You find yourself not fulfilled. You haven't moved up professionally in the way you envisioned. So many men and women live thoroughly discontented lives because the center of their lives is their work.

Spouses organize their lives around their mates. And sadly, they discover that their mate is having an affair, or they go through a divorce – the person crashes and burns.

Sometimes we can organize our lives around intangible things like excitement. More so in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, many people are organizing their lives around the search for excitement, a thrill. There is in contemporary America an addiction to having an adrenalin rush. There are many, many folks who just keep pursuing more and more extreme sports, sexual adventures, gambling, or drug highs. Even in business the pursuit of the deal and the adrenalin rush of closing the deal are things people pursue. The problem is that organizing your life around excitement will lead to constant dissatisfaction because there is an inherent contradiction in the quest for excitement.

The quest for excitement actually deadens your feelings so that the more you go after it, the less you feel. That's why people have to get more and more extreme. The same amount of excitement doesn't create the same level of thrill. There is the psychological principle of satiation.

The most common organizing principle for most of our lives is to organize our lives not around our spouse, or our children, or our work, or excitement, or the search for security, but to organize our lives around ourselves. If you really want to know what is most common not only to 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, but to 21<sup>st</sup> century Brazilians, Russians, Filipinos, Ethiopians, and everyone else, is our fundamental organizing principle: we organize life around ourselves. Human beings are fundamentally self-centered.

I hope you don't think I'm being unfair. Why do you think we get irritable, angry or stirred up inside when we have not been served in some way that we think we ought to be served? We are incredibly sensitive when our self is physically uncomfortable. We're hot, or cold. We're tired. We're hungry. We complain. We feel put out when our opinion is not asked in an area where we feel we have a right to state our opinion. We become irritable when someone imposes upon our time, or our schedule. Some of us may become disillusioned to the point of not being willing to engage in ministry or to serve when our contribution is not acknowledged, or when we aren't recognized, or when someone else takes credit for our ideas, or our participation.

Think about how angry you get when you are cut off, or when someone speaks over you, or doesn't listen to you, or pay attention to you. What is the issue that makes you irritable, discouraged, frustrated, or angry most of the time? Is it not that your self-centered universe is being challenged?

Of course, if we are going to build a community of hope, we not only need to discover the center of our own individual lives, but also the center of church life. Why does the church exist? I've talked with single guys who are tired of the bar scene and they've said, "You know, I realize now that I'll never meet a decent wife at a club or a bar. Maybe I'll start going to church. Because at church I'll probably meet the kind of woman that I would want to have as my wife."

Now, that is not an entirely illegitimate reason to participate in church. Church is a community of hope in a world of despair. It's fine to think about the church as a place where you could meet a potential spouse. In fact, men, I know a number of really fabulous women in this church and after the service, we're going to flip up their pictures and bios. I'm just kidding! But there are incredible single men and single women in our church. I believe it is appropriate. I think it is totally OK to seek relationship, even seek a marriage partner, within the context of the Christian community.

Adults who have been away from church for a period of time will often return to church when they have kids. There is a recognition today that the world has become a crazier and crazier place. Many people say I want to raise my kids with a sense of

values because they are certainly not going to get the values upon which to build their lives by watching MTV and watching two female rock stars French-kissing each other. They are certainly not going to be able to get values upon which to build their lives from their friends or the public schools. Many people say, “Maybe I’ll check church out, at least for my kids, so my kids get some rooting.”

Young moms often check out church because they are at home and they want to meet other young mothers. Widows and divorced people often will check out a church because they want to connect with other people in their life situation. It is totally appropriate to look to church to meet your social and relational needs.

There are people who come to church because they highly value social justice. They simply cannot accept the status quo as the way life must work. There are folks who come to church because they look out at the world and they recognize that there is massive injustice all around them. There are people who simply cannot tolerate that decent medical care is just available for the wealthy. If you don’t have \$500-\$600 a month to spend, then sorry, buddy, you are out of luck in getting affordable health care. There are folks who simply can’t accept the notion that unless you are wealthy your child cannot get a decent and safe education.

There are folks who are passionate about social justice and they cannot accept the fact that race in America still pretty much determines where you’re going to live and what schools you are going to attend, and what opportunities you are going to have in work, how much money you are going to make, the medical care you are going to

have, and the age you are going to die. It is totally appropriate to look to church as a vehicle for social justice.

Some churches organize around an activity. In the United States more and more churches are often organized around a person, typically the pastor. I just want to make a few remarks here because I think it is terribly dangerous that the church organizes around a pastor. Let me share a few personal thoughts with you. And I really want you to hear my heart now.

I've had the experience over the last several years of having literally dozens of people say to me that they can't believe the senior pastor of this church is out in the lobby talking to people, or that they find me in the café sitting and having a cup of coffee with people. I often respond, "Well what did you expect? Why is it strange for you to have me standing in the lobby chatting, or having a cup of coffee in the café?"

Their response is always, "Well at the last church I went to, the pastor simply walked off stage and it was impossible to ever talk to him or shake his hand. I could never get close to him." Or "In my last church the pastor had body guards and I would be physically kept away from getting near to the pastor."

I've said to these folks, "Do I need physical protection from you?"

Let me be perfectly honest with you. I see myself as just another member of Vineyard Columbus, as your Christian brother, who has a certain role in this church. I



think we all have ministries, if we're followers of Christ. And I have a ministry, a calling to teach and explain God's Word to you week by week. I try to model for you what a Christian looks like, as best I can. And as best as I can, I try to invite people into relationship with Christ. Mostly, I see myself trying to figure out, with all of my might, what God wants in this church. Ultimately, I feel like my job in the church is to make sure that God gets his way with us as a community. And that God gets his way in your individual lives. I don't feel like my job is to help a particular group in this church to get their way, or to assist the majority to win, to establish my will, or any combination of people's will, but to have God's will done.

You know, we have people who call every week to our receptionists asking if I'm going to be preaching. I'm flattered, honestly, to know that some of you are benefiting from my teaching, so that you feel like you would like to invite a friend or relative to listen to me teach. But every time a receptionist says, "Well, we have another call. Someone asked if you were going to be here," I have this awful feeling that this is not a healthy thing. We cannot build a community of hope around a person, around a personality, around a pastor, around a gifting.

Let me be frank here. What if I get run over, or disabled, or I'm called to the mission field? I have no current plans to cross the street without looking both ways. I have no current plans to have an anvil fall on my head, or to leave here. My entire family and my grandbabies are here. But it is not healthy, and certainly not a good thing for a church to focus too much attention on any single person.

We can't center church life on the pursuit of an experience. We can't center church life on the pursuit of knowledge. And here's the ultimate problem of life. We organize life around what is not God.

The Christian writer, Philip Yancey writes, "The historian of Alcoholics Anonymous titled his work Not-God because, he said, 'that stands as the most important hurdle an addictive person must surmount: to acknowledge, deep in their soul, not being God. No mastery of manipulation and control, at which alcoholics excel, can overcome the root problem; rather, the alcoholic must recognize individual helplessness and fall back in the arms of the Higher Power. First of all, we had to quit playing God,' concluded the founders of AA, 'and then allow God himself to 'play God' in the addict's life, which involves daily, even moment by moment surrender.'"

In other words, the basic problem of humanity is that we always try to organize life around what is Not-God and things collapse for us. So what are we to do? How do we build a community of hope in a world of despair? We listen to the words of Jesus and we recapture his passion and prayer: *Father, glorify your Son that your Son may glorify you.* We have to keep reminding ourselves that the center of our community is God.

That's why we have up that banner on the right side of our sanctuary. It's a quote from the old Westminster Catechism: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."

Dallas Willard wrote in his wonderful book, “Renovation of the Heart,” that the most powerful way you can restore a ruined soul is to learn to worship God. If you see inside yourself spiritual wreckage, the most powerful way for you to get your life together is to learn to practice the worship of God. The most powerful way that a church can become healthy and move from unhealth to health is to practice the worship of God. All through the Bible God’s people are directed to praise and worship God. When worship moves to the periphery and something else fills the center, the church or a human being begins to skate on thin ice.

Don’t ever let anyone tell you that worship is irrelevant. Whole books of the Bible are devoted to worship. The last 15 chapters of Exodus is a worship manual. The book of Leviticus is essentially a book regulating worship. For ancient Israel, the largest book in the Bible by far is the book of Psalms, a book entirely of worship. Much of the history for Israel centers on worship, preparing for worship two times, being judged for worship, worshipping in wrong ways, and being instructed in worship the right ways. We are commanded hundreds of times in the Bible to worship.

**SLIDE:**

***Psalm 95:6-7, Come, let us bow down and worship. Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.”***

**SLIDE:**

**Psalm 96:9, *Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness. Tremble before him all the earth.***

**SLIDE:**

**Psalm 99:5, *Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his footstool. He is holy.***

**SLIDE:**

**Psalm 100:2, *Worship the Lord with gladness. Come before him with joyful songs.***  
**and v. 4: *Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and praise his name.***

There are hundreds of verses calling us to verbally praise the Lord. There are hundreds of verses commanding us to sing to the Lord, bow before the Lord, kneel before the Lord, and raise your hands to the Lord.

What does it mean to us as we are attempting to build a community of hope? One of the primary practices that we together as a church need to commit ourselves to is the worship of God with our bodies, with our words, with our songs, with our minds, with our hearts, and with our money. Certainly, if we are going to build a community of hope, it means that you and I as individuals need to make a commitment to come to our weekend services not two-thirds of the way through our worship to listen to a message and then head out, but to get here, in our seats, in enough time to really give ourselves to the worship of God. There is nothing more powerful to restoring the

health of a church, and there is nothing more powerful for you in restoring the health of your own soul, than that you worship God.

I believe we are living in a time of the decline of Western culture. I believe more and more that church needs to become an alternative community, a place of refuge, and a place where people can come out from the world and find integrity, truth, kindness, and healing. The starting point for building such a community of hope is with individuals in the community learning to be God-centered worshippers. I want to encourage you to try a little experiment with yourself this week. When you are feeling pressured by the world, make a choice to lift up God in your mind. Think of him. Then begin to verbally worship God. As you are feeling pressured, verbally begin to praise God. When you see your life centered on what is not God, center back on God. Allow yourself to adore God. Instead of blocking God out while trying to deal with life on your own, start saying “yes” to God. Worship God. See the wreckage of your life getting healed. Watch how quickly the peace of God will come to you. We work, the church works when it’s centered on God. Let’s pray.

## **Building a God-Centered Church**

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Rich Nathan

September 13-14, 2003

John: The Jesus I Never Knew Series

John 17:1-5

- I. A Church Committed to the Entire Will of God
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  - B. The Wholistic Church
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    - 2. Evangelism and Social Justice
    - 3. Charismatic and Biblically Relevant
- II. A Church Committed to the Worship of God
  - A. The Passion of Christ
  - B. The Purpose of Life and Church
    - 1. Life and Church Centered Around Not-God
    - 2. Life and Church Centered Around God
  - C. The Practice of Worship