

RADICALLY FOLLOWING JESUS

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VERGE
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A Transcription of a Message at the Verge Conference by
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God At The Center

I teach a sermon prep class at our college. So I listen to college students speak. And sometimes they're really bad. But one of the students preached out of Exodus 33. And it just stopped me. I just sat there and thought, "I have got to repent."

Exodus 33, verse 15 Moses is talking to God and says,

"If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. How shall it be known that I found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?"

And the preaching student just challenged us. He said, "Is that what you want more than anything, just the presence of God?" You just want to know that he's with you right now. You just want to know that you're walking where He wants you to walk.

Because my motives in ministry have not always been pure. I came to know the Lord in high school. And I remember I would see these youth speakers and I remember thinking that they were the greatest speakers. I thought, "I want to be like *him*. Man, *he's* funny. *He's* convicting. I want to do *that*. Look at the way

the crowd responds." Those were the desires and thoughts that went through my mind when I started ministry.

And then I became a pastor. And then I began to see these big churches. And I would think, "I want to do *that*. I want a big church. I want to speak in front of crowds." It's just all these thoughts and all these different things go through your mind.

And you just lose sight of just that original intention way back when, when you just wanted to know you're being pleasing to God. And then the more responsibility you're given, the more God entrusts you with, the harder it gets sometimes to just say, "All I want is the presence of God. I just want to know." And if He's not in this thing, I don't want to be a part of it.

On The Verge

That's what I loved about the whole idea behind Verge. It's cool. It's new. Usually, you can't come up with any more new words for conferences because everyone has taken them.

I was thinking what's the idea of Verge? And I actually looked up what Verge means. It means "the outer limit," and I like that. I like that thought because I really do feel like we're right there at something. I don't see this as

one of these things where we go, "Come on, you guys, let's start a movement." I've been the guy that goes, "Yeah, come on, let's change the world." And everyone stands up and we sing, "Shout to the Lord" and run out. And everyone walks out going, "That was the greatest. We're going to start a movement."

I haven't sensed that with this. What I've sensed is really that God is doing something, and we really are on the verge of seeing something happen.

I remember when I was really struggling with some of this. And I got this email from Neil Cole asking me to write a foreword in his book. And I said, "No, sorry, I don't have any time." But then later, the Holy Spirit said, "You know what? Go back. Read that one."

I go, "Which one? Neil Cole's one?" I don't know the guy.

So I went, and I read his book, "Church 3.0," and I'm going, "No way. Shut up. This is everything I've been thinking." It also happened when we read "Total Church" as a staff. We said to ourselves, "This is everything we've been talking about."

Rethinking American Church

I don't believe this is something I would have ever come up with. I liked American Church. I did. I liked being

able to hide in the back and come in and do my thing, my relationship. But I don't really like hanging out with a lot of people. I'm just being honest with you. I'm more of an introvert.

I remember years ago my wife asked, "Honey, what do you love most about me?" And my answer to her, without even really flinching, was this: "Of all the people on the earth, you bug me the least."

What happened was I started studying the scriptures and looking at scripture. It always bugged me, because you would read scripture and you would see one thing, but then you would go to a church and you would see something else. And now, everyone's just going, "I'm done with that."

There was a unity, a love in the scriptures that we just don't see in church as we've been doing it. This whole what we're calling missional community thing, people have asked me, "Hey, well, you're just doing it because it's the emergent thing." But, I am not emergent.

People say, "Are you this movement? Are you this movement? Are you this movement?"

And I go, "I don't know, man. I just read the Bible." Maybe we're regurgitant. Whatever, this is what they did. There it is again. I'm not trying to come up with

anything new. When I read the scriptures, this is what I'm convicted about, of the way the church ought to look.

But I remember years ago after I came back from Africa. And the Lord just tore me up. He just showed me, "You don't care about the poor. You just avoid them." And when I got over there, it just caused me to fall in love with the people over there. And suddenly, my heart for those who were in need...I started seeing it on every page of scripture. I was like, "How do I miss this?"

And it was so crazy because then I'd start talking to my friends in other places around the nation, and guess what God was teaching them? The Spirit was saying the same thing to them. And suddenly, you saw this generation of people going, "Man, we have got to start caring for the poor." And that just became this huge thing.

But it wasn't like we all got together and said, "Hey, let's start a movement on caring for the poor." It was just something the Holy Spirit was doing in each of our hearts in all these different places.

Listening To The Holy Spirit

And then a few years ago, the Lord really was convicting me on my theology on the Holy Spirit. I started reading

the scriptures going, "Wait a second, I've been completely ignoring the Holy Spirit." Not completely, I would never deny He exists, but the reality of Him in my life. And so then I started talking to my friends, and guess what the Holy Spirit's leading them to think about? In the last couple years, we've been getting together as elders and looking at scripture and going, "Man, I want this. I want what the scriptures are saying."

And then as we go out and talk to other people, we start to realize, "Wait, other people are even further down the road than we are."

It's something the Holy Spirit is doing. And that's what I love about this is it takes a lot of pressure off. I don't stand up here going, "Okay, come on, Francis, start a movement." I just go, "Man, a movement's started. And it's cool I get to be a part of it." We get to be a part of it. And you're here because the Holy Spirit has guided you here through your teaching, through your study, through your theology, whatever it is.

Driven By Theology

We have to make sure this is driven theologically, though, that it's not just this "Oh, here's a cool thing to do. Let's break down the megachurch." It's more just "I read this in God's word, and so it has to be done."

See, I've had other ideas in my head that weren't necessarily biblically driven. I go, "Ah, why don't we try this at the church?" or, "Why don't we try this? What don't we try that?" And sometimes it goes well, but sometimes it fails. Sometimes I just quit and go, "You know what? It's just too hard."

But, this is different because this *is* something. I still remember the day when I was with a couple of my elders. And we were sitting just at Panera, and we were just talking about church, and we're talking about, biblically, what it's supposed to be.

And then the reality hit us. I still remember when the reality hit us where one of the guys said, "You know, what scares me is when I read the scriptures, God doesn't get mad at the people. He gets mad at the leaders." He said, "Our church is the way it is because we led them here."

And there was this sense of, seriously, it was this sickening "I don't want to stand before God on this one," and just go, "Well, this is the way everyone else was doing it."

No, I knew better. I know better now. And I know what ought to take place in these gatherings because I'm looking at scripture, and as we looked, it was one of

those things where we go, "We have got to change."

I don't know how. We're still in the middle of the process. But it's not something we can just quit because it's biblically driven. It's theologically driven. It's not an idea. It's not a trendy thing. It's just something we see in scripture and we say, "We've got to do this."

And it's cool because as we look around and talk to other people and many of you, you all say, "Yeah, that's the same thing I feel."

Be Biblically Courageous

One time a young man at a conference asked me this question:

What would you say to a younger guy that's thinking about starting a church?

And I said to him, "Be courageous biblically. Be biblically courageous. Be as biblical as you can. Just erase what you've seen everywhere else and just open up the Bible and say, 'Okay, if I only had the Bible, and I'd never been to this church or that church. Just open up this book.'"

I said to him, "Just try to figure out, what would you do?" Because I told him that I wasn't mature enough, and I wasn't courageous enough to do that. I just looked

around at other patterns. I just looked at what other people were doing, and I would tweak it. I told him, "Well, I like this about his. I like this about his. I like this about that church over there. So I'm going to combine those and make this thing."

I told him that I didn't have the wisdom to just sit down with the word of God and ask 'What is it just clearly saying? What's the obvious truth just based upon scripture?'

And I really encouraged him to just try that. Because I criticize the cults all the time. I criticize cults because they take this verse from here, this verse from here, and this verse from here. They take all of these verses and justify their theology. But you never would have come up with that from a simple, natural reading of scripture.

Anyone can create a new religion and take verses from all these different places and make it work. But you would never get that if you just sat down and read through the scriptures and just came to a conclusion on your own. You were fed all of this theology.

And in the same way, I have to look at myself and the way that I've done church and go, "Okay, would I ever have come up with this just from scripture?" And the answer is no. I wouldn't have. What would I have come up with?

Church According To Scripture

If I just read the scriptures, I wouldn't even think so much about the gathering. My first thought wouldn't be "Let's have a gathering." Out of the scriptures, I would think, "I'm on a mission. I love this God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. And now, I've got to go out and make disciples."

That's what I would think. I need to go out there and just reach as many people as I can. I'm supposed to teach them to obey everything that God's commanded. That's what I would get out of scripture.

And then what would naturally happen as I did that, is suddenly I would find those other people who are on that same mission because we would be the weirdest people on earth, right? We would stick out. We would be so different.

And that pressure to always stay on that mission, everyone else would be beating me down so I would actually need these brothers and sisters in my life and tell them, "Hey, don't let me slow down. And I won't let you slow...We got to stay on this mission together."

You see this is why I wasn't into fellowship before, because I didn't need any more friends. Okay, it wasn't

like "Oh yeah, let's just get another gathering so I have someone to talk to." I didn't need accountability groups so that I wouldn't sleep around or whatever it was. I don't need that to do American church. I don't need fellowship. But to stay on mission every day, I need people because I'm going to get distracted. There are so many things I would rather do than make disciples.

So, I need people in my life to tell me this. That's what I would get out of scripture is I have to go out and start making disciples. And as I did that, I really believed that I would start gathering with other people doing the same thing.

Taking The Great Commission Seriously

I would look at that Great Commission that we all memorized. And I would take it literally.

But basically, we tame everything down. We tone everything down. We domesticate things in the church.

I'm a very simple person, and I just go black and white. Here's what God says to do, "Go make disciples." It's so weird how we change things in church and we make everything about the heart, but the heart becomes not what we see in the scriptures where it was the mission control center, the decision-making center of a person's being.

But it becomes like this weird, vague, I received Jesus into my heart. What does that mean? And we'll take the Great Commission and different things about it. We just don't take His words literally.

It's so weird because when I was a kid we used to play this game called Simon Says, right? Most of us have played that unless you're really young because there's no app for it. Simon Says is when Simon says pat your head, so you would pat your head. It was a very simple game, but it's so weird how in the church, Jesus Says is a totally different game.

If Jesus says something, you don't have to do it, you just have to memorize it. You study it. Guys, it doesn't make any sense, a lot of the things we do. When he tells us to go out and make disciples, and how many people in our churches are actually making disciples?

They memorized it.

When I tell my daughter, "Hey Rachel, go clean your room," she doesn't come back to me two hours later and go, "I memorized what you said. You said, 'Rachel, go clean your room.' I can say it in Greek. My friends are going to come over, and we're going to have a study of what it would look like if I cleaned my room."

She knows better than that. And so why do we think

we're going to come before the Judge one day and quote everything that he said and talk about how much we know? It's just this black and white stuff. If I just started with scripture then here's what I would do: I'd start making disciples.

Taking Acts Seriously

I think about the love that I see in scripture. In scripture what I do see about the interactions between believers or followers is such an intense love. Won't you get that if you just read scripture? Won't you think, "Okay, when I meet a brother, I have to treat that guy like family."

Because when I would read the book of Acts, Chapter 2, I would read that and think, "Wow, they devoted themselves with fortitude to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul. And many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to

their number day by day those who were being saved."

I love chapter 4, verse 32, when he says, "Now, the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own. But they had everything in common. And with great power, the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and a great grace was upon them all.

There was not a needy person among them for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid at the apostles' feet. And it was distributed to each as any had need."

Mission, Then Community

See, we read those verses, and we go, "Man, could you imagine being a part of something like that where no one cared, you see?" But it wasn't that they got together and said, "Hey, let's practice community." They didn't say, "Let's get together, and let's practice fellowship."

No, they were on this mission because they saw someone rise from the grave, and they just go, "You know what? I saw him. He was on the cross. I saw him die. And then, I saw him walking around. And he said, 'Go, tell everyone to obey me.'"

And so at that point, these people were just like "Okay, fine, I could care less about any of my stuff. I just saw a person rise from the grave. There really is life after death. I have got to start telling everyone. And if you're going to tell people, then look, I don't care about my stuff anymore."

And they were this group of people that just didn't care about their stuff anymore. They cared more about being part of this family, this group of people that were all going to get this message out. They realized, "Our lives have eternal purpose now. We just saw someone rise from the grave." It's radical, but it makes sense.

Radical Commitment

That's the thing is when you read the book of Acts, you look at their commitment and the crazy things they did, and while it's insane, it makes sense. It's radical, but it makes sense. What wouldn't have made sense was if you read all of that, and they saw a man rise from the grave. He said, "Go and make disciples," so they got together in a room every Sunday and sang some songs and a guy taught. See, that wouldn't really make sense.

And they came back the next week and did the same thing, and then the next Sunday and did the same thing. And some of them gave 10% even. You would read that

and go, "Shut up, you guys didn't see someone rise from the grave. If you saw someone rise from the grave, you'd be doing a lot more than that. You'd be telling everyone you know."

It makes sense. If I just started from scripture, I would think about the love that I'd have for these other people. I would think about 1 Peter 2 where it talks about how we're this holy nation. We're these living stones. We make up a temple. I'm just a piece of it. I'm like a little Lego piece, there's nothing great about it, but it's this idea of working together, and we stack up, and we create this organism where we love each other so much. And people in the world start looking and going, "Man, look at the way they interact. And they actually see Jesus."

That's why in 1 John 4:12, it says no one's ever seen God. But if we love one another, somehow His love manifests in us. So no one out there has ever seen God. But if we, as the body, would love one another, they'd walk in, and they'd get a glimpse of Him. They'd get a glimpse of His love.

Radical Unity

This is the way scripture says that this is how we reach the world. It's very similar to what Jesus said when he was praying in John 17. He goes, "Lord, I pray that they'd

be one. I and them, you and me, may they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you've loved me."

That's weird. He says once they're unified, when they really love one another, not only will I be in their midst, but when they love each other like that, the world's going to believe that Jesus was sent from God. Our unity is going to show that. That's crazy to me.

I remember when I grew up in church, the way we proved that Jesus really came from God was through apologetics, through prophecy. I'm not saying that's bad. I still use it.

But scripture says no, it's going to be through your unity. It's going to be by the way that you love one another. And the truth is when people came into our gatherings on Sunday they didn't experience that. They still don't. We're working on it.

Something has to change. Something has to break, because when I read the scriptures, there's supposed to be such a unity where God wants us like a body, 1 Corinthians 12, a hand, foot, eye, ear. We're all just part of this one thing.

Do you think that way? Do you think about God in heaven right now? What about back at our churches or

gatherings? Right here, God wants us to live like a body. If we care about what Jesus wants, we are saying Jesus is Lord, then what does he desire? He wants to see us, even in these next couple of days, living like family, living like an extension of one another.

And I thank God, I will say this, with the different frustrations I've had with our gatherings, I look at our elders and the relationships we have with one another and I go, "Okay, this is it. This is biblical." These are guys that I know would give their lives for Jesus. These are guys who are giving their lives for Jesus, and their wives are giving their lives. We're on this mission together. There's a unity. It's a body.

I've thought about leaving, I always do. We all do, right? Okay, let's be honest. We all think about quitting, but I go, "Man, but I can't leave this group of guys. I've just never seen a body work like this. We disagree. We're so different. But there's this unity."

Radical Sacrifice

I'll never forget us studying this Acts passage together one night after having dinner together and breaking bread together and just going, "Man, haven't you guys always just thought, 'Why can't this happen in southern California? Why do people always say this is cultural?'" The believers began to sell their possessions. That wasn't

the norm. Why do we say that's cultural?"

Why would they write it if everyone was doing that anyways? And everyone always had everything together? No, there was something unique happening. It was this weird group where they had everything in common and no one was like "No, it's about me, it's about me, it's about me." No, it's about this mission. It's about this God.

I thought, "Why can't we do that where we depend on each other?" And I looked at one of the guys and said, "I promise you that if anything happens to you, I really look at you like a brother, like the Bible says. And if anything happened to you, I can promise you that whatever is mine, is your family's. I would take care of them just as much as I take care of my own family. Your kids, you don't have to worry about them."

And for guys to look at me and say the same thing, look me in the eyes and say, "You know friends, I promise you, if anything ever happened to you, everything, whatever is mine is your family's. I got your kids. I'll take care of them."

And pretty soon, we're began thinking "So, you're my life insurance. We can just ditch life insurance." Yes, let's ditch it. And let's be interdependent on one another. And so if you guys don't come through, then my family

is going to be messed up. But I know you guys will come through because I've seen the way you've sacrificed for this thing. You believe in this thing. It was just an awesome time where we just said, "Hey, my car, my house, does anyone need money, even my bank account, whatever?"

And I tell you, it was one of those times where we walked out of that house, all of us, with this sense of awe, like, "That felt like Christianity." That was weird. I don't know when I felt that. Have you ever had those times where you just felt, "This feels like the Bible?" And it's so rare, that's what stinks is it's like this shouldn't be like that. These are the things that are obviously biblical.

Radical Power

I think about the power that I would believe in if I just read the scriptures, the power of Jesus to do something, the Holy Spirit, the Promised One.

Are you sure you've experienced the Holy Spirit this last year? Are a lot of things that you've seen and experienced, are a lot of them explainable just by natural means? That's why it's so important that this has to be a Jesus thing. The reason why I'm a part of this is I believe it's something Jesus is doing, and I'm not trying to make Him do something.

I'm not trying to start a movement. We're not strategizing and planning a movement, and asking how do we start one? It can't be that because that doesn't flow with scripture.

The disciples, they didn't get together and plan out to have Pentecost, "Okay, John, you learn Chinese. And Peter, you do Spanish. We already changed your name once, now you're Pedro."

It wasn't a plan. What was it? It was the Holy Spirit working in all these different men wasn't it? The Holy Spirit working in a bunch of different individuals, but it was creating one unified result. And that's what I'm saying about what I think is going on in here.

When I looked back in my life, this stuff started to really bug me. It started bugging other people too. And that's why I get excited about it. It's like, okay, I'm just along for the ride now. I'm not trying to create anything here. I really believe this is something the Holy Spirit is doing.

The other day, I went with my buddy out to the beach to go surfing. And it was totally flat. There's nothing there. So we bought a breakfast burrito and drove home.

I didn't go out in the ocean with him and say, "Okay, you go out further and splash." Maybe you can make a wave. No, you just go, "Oh, there's nothing here. We just go

home."

That's the same thing I'm talking about with this, is we just come Jesus. I think this is what you're doing. I think you're starting a wave here. But if you're not, then let's just go home. Because I've tried to start movements, haven't you? Don't try to create something and make something work. It doesn't work. There's no power to it.

I remember one time in an elder meeting, we were trying to figure out this whole community thing, and we were just frustrated, and we were getting on each other's nerves a little bit. And one of our elders, Matt, just stopped us and said, "You guys, I feel like we're just trying too hard." He said, "I've noticed in my neighborhood, I don't even say things to certain people anymore. I just get on my knees. I start praying for them. I can't even tell you about just the results. Things are just happening." I thought, "Wow, that was so good."

So when I read the scriptures, I go, "Gosh, it really seemed like there was just a movement. It really was Jesus building his church, and nothing was going to stop it." And when that happens, it's not manipulated. It's not forced. It's not pushed.

And that's why I say I hope you're with me on this, that we're not here to try to start a movement. We're here because we believe God is starting a wave. And it seems

like, just like on that day of Pentecost where He talked to a bunch of different individuals and uniquely gifted them and there was this one unified result, it seems like that's what's going on right now.

And it's what I want to pray for because I go, "No, this is biblical." When Jesus says to pray in his name, it means more than obviously "in Jesus name, we pray." It's like what are the things that Jesus wants? And these are the things we ought to be confident about. That's the thing is as we pray, even now, I'm going to say, "Lord, would you start getting the believers in our nation to really love you and be serious about making disciples? And can you, God, just put a love in us for one another where we really start looking like family?"

Because you know, our churches don't look anything like families anymore. They ditched the moment one bad thing is said up front or one service changes. There's no sense of unity or oneness. And it's like, Lord, that has to change. There's no interdependence and a sharing of our belongings. We're just as individualistic as the rest of the world.

What I love about it is those are the things God wants to change. When I see in scripture that it is His desire, I know I'm praying in Jesus name when I ask for those things. And so it helps me because...You know how sometimes when you pray you don't know what to pray

for and you're not even sure if you're praying for the right thing?

This is one of those things where I know I am praying for the right thing. I'm asking for people to go on mission, to live mission lives. I'm asking people to love one another so much so that people can see Christ in the way that we care for one another. These are the things I'm asking for. These are the things I know I see in scripture. I'm asking that we really make Jesus Lord and not just play this weird "Jesus says" game in church where we just memorize and study and talk, but we really live this way.

An Unstoppable Force

The last thing I want to do is try to start something and get something going. Aren't you all just all bored of that? Don't you just think, "God I want something that's clearly you, a movement of Your spirit where this should have a life of it's own, an unstoppable force," because that's what I see in the book of Acts. Nothing was going to stop it. Nothing was going to stop that church.

I want you to think and pray about the book of Acts and how unstoppable they were. Imagine back then, these people come out speaking in different languages, amazing, even when sin tried to creep in there with

Ananias and Sapphira, God struck them dead. Okay, fine, problem solved. You move on. Then Stephen, remember when he was about to get stoned? Nothing was going to stop him. But Saul might stop him. Saul could stop him. No.

You see how it's all Jesus, the whole thing with Saul and everything else? Every time there was something that was going to maybe block the church, God said, "No, no, no, I want to build my church. The gates of hell won't stand against this thing." I just want to be a part of that. I've done the mega-church thing, the speaking thing.

At the end of my life, I'm going to stand before God and he's going to say, "I didn't ask you to do all those things. Here's what I asked you to do. Here's the way I asked you to love others. Did you do that?"

And that's why I say, "This is something that has to happen." It's by the power of the Holy Spirit that I'm going to ask that we can continue in the book of Acts and that our lives and our gatherings would be congruent with what we see in scripture.