

ESSENTIAL CHURCH, PART 6: FOCUS
Habakkuk 1:2-4, 2:2-4, 2:18-20, 3:17-19 (NASB)
David Bruce Linn
6 June 2010
All Rights Reserved

That Hideous Strength by C. S. Lewis is a story which centers on a college professor named Mark Studdock who does not know exactly what he wants in life. He finds himself in the faculty lounge one day talking to a very progressive and genteel colleague who tells him about a wonderful opportunity Mark might have with a group which we will call the Organization. The Organization seems to be doing all sorts of things like acquiring land and constructing fine buildings. Furthermore, the Organization is at the head of a movement to be done with all sorts of old fashioned ideas and institute new ones. Mark is invited to come see the main facility of the Organization to inquire about a future there.

Mark goes to this fine facility even though he does not know what the purposes of the Organization are. He gets assigned a room and is invited to meet people, but for many days he does not find out anything about his future employment. His discreet inquiries yield no information about what he might be doing, who he would be working under, and what his salary might be. He discovers that he is being billed a massive amount of money for his room and board while he waits around, but he pretends that it does not matter and resolves never to tell his wife, Jane.

Finally Mark insists on a meeting with the Deputy Director, Wither. Wither does not greet Mark when he enters his office and Mark just sits while Wither works at his desk. Finally, in a fit of nerves, Mark blurts out all his questions at once. Wither still does not answer and Mark gradually lapses back into silence. Finally, after Mark offers to leave, Wither greets him: "You are Mr. Studdock, I think?" Mark presses his case for a clarification of his position in the Organization.

He does not get it. Wither begins a rambling discourse which neither confirms nor denies anything. In the end, Mark remains tantalized with the possibility that the Organization will hire him but no solid information: BLAH BLAH BLAH BLAH. Mark returns to his room with a handful of maybes (cf. *That Hideous Strength*, C. S. Lewis, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1946, pp. 102 ff).

OUT OF FOCUS

Imagine Mark Studdock's perplexity! He follows a vague impulse to seek out some improvement in his situation and finds that the Organization reveals so little to a potential new employee that he cannot decide whether to connect with it. In fact he cannot even find out how one connects with it.

This reminds me of the day that I received Christ. I submitted my life to the Lord on a Sunday morning and I hurriedly dressed and went to the church where some of my friends attended. After the service I presented myself to the berobed pastor, spilling out my story of seeking God for a year and coming to the place of being born again. I was massively excited and urged him to tell me how I could connect with the church and grow. He listened impassively until I was done and then said: "Just keep coming."

In Mark Studdock's case the Organization turned out to be evil and deliberately concealed its purposes and operations. In my case the church I attended on the day I received Christ was a case of being out of focus. It had become nervous about the whole matter of people being born again. It had no plan to assimilate a newly born again person, and nothing to offer as a concrete means of growth in Christ--not a class, not a book, not a personal connection, not an official membership process—nothing. The denomination in which this church is a member did a self-study to discover why they were shrinking and what to do about it. Their conclusion was to try to appeal to people of the same nationality. This is evidence, as theologian Stanley Hauerwas said of his own denomination, of forgetting what it means to be the church.

SHARPENING OUR FOCUS

I am very thankful that The Christian and Missionary Alliance in which our church is a member has a wonderful history of sharp focus. We have a superb mission statement which hangs in the lobby of the church and the church office building. I must confess, however, that when the Alliance hired the Barna Research Group to call the pastors and find out if they knew this excellent statement, I could not recite it in its entirety. I felt embarrassed about that for years. I can quote the Bible verses which go with every part of it, but not the statement itself.

I am no longer embarrassed about my failure. It finally dawned on me that if I could not recite it almost no one else could do so either. It is sixty words long, has a colon, two semicolons, and three bullet points. It is excellent as a reference tool, but it is just too long to remember. That means that no matter how long we hang it in our lobby, it will function as a guide but will not help us focus our work to the extent that we need. Frankly, it makes sense only to us and others who already know about Jesus. Try reading our mission statement to the next person who comes to you with a broken heart.

The elders and I have collaborated to design not a different mission statement but a memorable summary which will make more sense to those outside our organization who need what we have to offer. If you said this to someone with a broken heart they might find it hopeful, even if they didn't know what it all meant: "Our mission is to introduce people everywhere to forgiveness, healing, and purpose in Jesus Christ." I have provided you with a copy of this for your refrigerator or workbench wall along with the full version. I urge you to learn it by heart. Some version of this will end up on display in the church so that when you enter the worship environment from your argument in the car you will remember that forgiveness is the first thing we are all about.

The first thing the summary statement tells us is who we are targeting: people everywhere. We cannot reach very easily to those who are far away, but by God's grace we can, indeed impact the whole world starting in Morgantown and extending to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Secondly, we learn what our message is to those who do not yet know Christ: forgiveness, healing, and purpose in Jesus Christ. And although the Jewish prophet Habakkuk did not know about Jesus Christ directly, he had a firm grip on the basic elements of God's message to all people. Habakkuk began with the assumption that we are all a mess, including God's people, as he wrote in his first chapter: **"How long, O LORD, will I call for help, /And You will not hear? /I cry out to You, 'Violence!' /Yet You do not save. /Why do You make me see iniquity, /And cause me to look on wickedness? /Yes, destruction and violence are before me; /Strife exists and contention arises. /Therefore the law is ignored /And justice is never upheld. /For the wicked surround the**

righteous; /Therefore justice comes out perverted" (Habakkuk 1:2-4).

We then discover that Habakkuk had a grip on the meaning of the first keyword of our summary mission statement, namely, forgiveness, which encompasses all of redemption in one word: **"Behold, as for the proud one, /His soul is not right within him; /But the righteous will live by his faith"** (Habakkuk 2:4). Notice that it does not say: "The proud one can be OK just by trying to be better." The New Testament writers quoted this verse three times because it goes right to the core of the good news of Jesus Christ: it is your faith in him which makes you well. Righteousness comes as a gift to the one who trusts in Christ. Even before Christ it was the only path to salvation as Paul said in Romans: **"ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS"** (Romans 4:3, caps in orig.). So our first keyword, forgiveness, expresses the benefit to those who receive Christ as Savior.

Our second keyword, healing, is a composite of Christ our Healer and Christ our Sanctifier. I wrestled with the idea of having four keywords because of the structure of the Fourfold Gospel, but the summary became too long. Furthermore, the point of the summary statement is to make sense to those who have not yet met Christ. Surely one of the marks of people today is a personal brokenness. Where should people look for help in putting their broken lives back together again? The message bound up in our second keyword, healing, is that they should look to Jesus.

Habakkuk never said that God was his healer, but he displayed the faith attitude which brings the healing of God: **"Though the fig tree should not blossom /And there be no fruit on the vines, /Though the yield of the olive should fail /And the fields produce no food, /Though the flock should be cut off from the fold /And there be no cattle in the stalls, /Yet I will exult in the LORD, /I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. /The Lord GOD is my strength, /And He has made my feet like hinds' feet, /And makes me walk on my high places"** (Habakkuk 3:17-19). At the very moment when it looks like we have nothing and that all is lost, if we will exult in the Lord by faith and take him as our strength and salvation we will discover that his healing flows into us. He may choose to give a miraculous deliverance or the miracle of grace to endure. Either way it is a miracle and a healing. And Christ as our Sanctifier maps onto healing because the act of taking Christ as our holiness for daily life is what brings the experience of healing to our sinful souls. Paul wrote: **"For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification"** (Romans 6:19).

The third keyword, purpose, encompasses Christ as our coming King and also the second part of Christ our Sanctifier. Along with empowerment for holy living sanctification brings us power for service. And whom do we serve? We serve our coming King! We do whatever is in his mind and heart for us to do. This encompasses discipleship because it is his purpose that we grow into our identity as children of our King. This also encompasses our mission to spread the gospel, because the core purpose of our King during the church age is to seek and save those who are lost.

Habakkuk was commanded, as we are, to run with the news of God's deliverance and of righteousness by faith. Habakkuk had demanded from the Lord the answer to the question of what he was going to do about the mess we are all in, and the Lord began his response with the following instruction: **"Record the vision /And inscribe it on tablets, /That the one who reads it may run"** (Habakkuk 2:2). This message was too important to commit to memory. It should be written down,

slapped into the hands of a herald who would run from city to city and read it aloud in the public square. In the same way, Christ has sent the promise of God to bring forgiveness, healing, and purpose into the lives of those who trust him out upon us, and we are commanded to run with it: **"He said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 'You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you...'"** (Luke 24:46-49). So let us pick up the good news and run!

So many people wander through life without a sense of purpose. They ask: Why am I here? in many ways for a lifetime and never get an answer. We have the answer! And so it is that "Our mission is to introduce people everywhere to forgiveness, healing, and purpose in Jesus Christ."

A PLAN FOR LOCAL CHURCH REFORMATION

The last thing we want when people encounter our church is for them to have the same experience as Mark Studdock who was left with nothing but questions about the Organization. The only way to prevent that is for us to sharpen the focus of our church so that people can find what they need in Christ. The summary mission statement acts as a lens by which to do that.

For example, what specifically do we do to lead people to forgiveness in Christ? Do we go where they are as Christ did, or are we sitting in comfort waiting for them to come to us? What are the exact ministries and tools which are effective in this place and time?

Secondly, how are we helping people to find healing in Christ? The typical person who receives Christ for forgiveness today immediately thinks: *That's great! Now what exactly do I do about my broken heart, my broken family, and my broken soul?* We must have concrete ways to assist people in walking the path to freedom and healing in Christ which are easy for them to find. This path must be built into the structure of our church.

Thirdly, what are the church ministries which lead people into empowerment, discipleship, service, and outreach? These need to be organized and spelled out in such a way that people can find their next step as they walk with Christ.

If you are listening carefully you should be getting the idea that we are going to have to change the way we have done some things, add things which we have never done, and eliminate things which simply do not promote the focus we need to do the work of Christ effectively. We do this not because we want to have good numbers on our annual report but because Jesus Christ is on the hunt for lost sheep and he wants them found! He loves them beyond measure. Do we? If we do, we will pay the cost of refining our mission so that when people like Mark Studdock visit they will not spend weeks wondering whether anyone can help them.

That is the only way that people will conclude that the church of Jesus Christ is essential to their lives. Knowing our mission and working hard to put it into practice is the only way to be the essential church which Mark Studdock desperately needs. It is time to do the hard work encompassed in our mission. I invite you to join me to pray in humble dependence on God to lead us through this process of focus.