

Purpose of the Church

In our video clip, we saw how the world would like the church to be. We don't need to preach Jesus' transformation or his divinity. We need to preach His tolerance. We need to measure our goodness by what we embrace, what we create and who we include. By doing this we have a new sensation, a lightening of the spirit, a freedom of the old ways. Most non-Christians seeing that, and even many Christians, would say that there is nothing wrong with that. That it makes sense. That the church is about our tolerance, our goodness and our freedom.

I read some mission statements from some churches on the internet. One of them said, "Our mission is to live our faith as a congregation, inspired by Jesus Christ as individuals and as a corporate body, and to move forward in our mission of peace within our church, our community and the world." Another said this: "Inspired by Christ, we strive to create a reconciling community where all are welcome to seek, worship, and serve as individuals interwoven by God's love. Our goal of spiritual wholeness encourages: Open dialogue, Mutual respect, Spiritual quest." Most non-Christians, and even many Christians, would say that there is nothing wrong with these. That they makes sense. That the church is about peace in the church, the community and the world.

Jonathan was looking for a sponsor to do an evangelism class at Stony Brook University. He was directed to a Catholic sister. She said she couldn't help because "we don't do evangelism, here. You might want to talk to the Protestant Pastor." So he went to the pastor and asked her. She wasn't sure if she could help because she wasn't sure what was going to happen to people when they died. She also wasn't sure that she agreed that Jesus was the only way to the Father. When it was pointed out that Jesus himself had said that, she replied that, "Jesus teaches a lot of different things". She particularly liked the verses about Jesus saying things like, "Love your neighbor" and those other love and forgiveness verses.

And here is the problem, we have non-Christians and many "pseudo-Christians" who have one idea of what the church is about. We have true Christians who have another idea of what the church is about. And we wonder why non-Christians give us a hard time when the true Christian Church reaches out to them. We have a divided message from the churches about what we are all about.

The Wildlife Conservation Society, the Guide Dog Foundation, Cancer Research Institute, Save the Children, CARE, Doctors without Borders, Reading is Fundamental. If you have ever heard of these, you know exactly what they do. There is no doubt what their primary purpose is. Each has a primary purpose and people give to these agencies of their money and their time because they understand their purpose.

But people don't know what the church is all about, at least not the biblical concept of the Church. They don't have that same clear understanding of what the purpose of the church is as they do for these other groups. They think that the purpose of the church is

to make a lot of money for the pastor. Or they think that the purpose is to help people in emergency situations. Or they think it's around for free counseling services.

So what is the purpose of the church? Let's take a look at our own Mission Statement. The Ark is a praying community of believers, reaching and developing people for Jesus. Great statement, if I say so myself. It shows our purposes to be: praying (or worshipping in general), being a community (which includes fellowship among the church and ministries to the local and not-so-local communities), reaching (also known as Evangelism – ahhh, not the “E” word!) and developing (discipling, or in other words, growing people in their faith and their walk with Christ). Those are all good things. But we need to keep the primary purpose in sight at all times. And that primary purpose needs to be loud and clear to everyone. This is what The Church of Jesus Christ has done very poorly.

The problem is that there are definitely multiple purposes of the church – not including the tons of money for the pastor, of course. However, the church has forgotten what the most important one is. *It's reaching the lost with the good news of Jesus Christ.* We've worked hard to make sure that we're well rounded and that we do all the purposes of the church well, but somewhere along the line, The Church has lost track of their mission statement, of their true purpose, of the main thing.

Before we go into the purpose of the church, let's first take a quick look at what is the church.

Matthew 16:15-18: ¹⁵"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. When Peter answers correctly, Jesus recognizes that God has given this answer to him. Jesus then proceeds to tell the disciples that this is the foundation of the church. There are those who would like to make Peter the foundation of the church, but this would be both bad theology and bad linguistics. Theologically, we read over and over again that Jesus is the head of the church, that Jesus is the foundation of the church and our faith. We also read that Jesus is our only advocate. To place Peter in the mix is incorrect theology. It also doesn't work with the rest of the gospel story where we see that James and John both ask for the highest places in Jesus' kingdom and Jesus says that it is not for him to decide who gets what position (Matt 20:20-23), where Peter betrays Jesus (God forbid the church ever betray her Head!) (Matt 26:69-75), and when Peter is properly rebuked by Paul (Gal 2:11-13). Linguistically, the work rock used for Peter is “petros”. It means a rock or a stone. In the New Testament, it occurs 155 times, every time it is translated “Peter”. The other word we see for rock is “petra”. It means a rock, cliff, ledge, boulder. It occurs 15 times in the New Testament and it is never translated “Peter”. It is always translated rock. The point is that “this rock” is not the same as Peter. Peter is a rock, but Jesus was building his church upon something bigger, something greater – upon a boulder, a cliff.

This boulder is the fact that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God”. So the church is a group of people gather together around the fact of who Jesus is.

Now that we’ve determined what the church is, let’s take a look at the purposes of the church and let’s see how we stack up:

The principle purpose of the church is to reach out to people with this gospel message of Jesus Christ.

Acts 26:15-18: ¹⁵“Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?'

" 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. ¹⁶‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. ¹⁷I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them ¹⁸to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

Paul gets his walking orders from Jesus. Jesus tells him that his job would be to open their eyes from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins. Paul goes on to plant many churches and write many letters – many of which make up our New Testament. In those letters, Paul teaches these new churches many things, including how to act, what is proper and improper behavior. However, he never forgets what his main objective is – to go out among the people and teach them of Jesus and what he has done for them.

Phil 1:12-14: Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ¹³As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul tells that he is in jail not because he was telling churches how to live or what they must do but because he was spreading the gospel message. He also tells of his joy from the work of other Christians who were doing the same. Then he continues

Phil 1:27-28a: Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel ²⁸without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.

Paul expects the church to stand as one spirit, contending as one man – that means everyone in agreement, everyone doing the same work and mission – and that standing would obviously be opposed by the world. Again, the world is not opposed to the church doing good things. The Hurricane in the Gulf Coast has proven that. There were people in that area who did not want anything to do with the church before the hurricane. But in the aftermath, the churches were the single greatest rescuers of the needy and those same

people had no problem going to the church to get food and provisions. When the church performs those socially edifying roles, society has no problem with the church. It's easy for the church to see that and it's much more comfortable for the church to lean that way and do that type of work. But it is not the work that Paul was speaking about here. We know that because Paul says that there will be opposition. This work to the church that Paul is speaking about is the spreading of the Gospel message: That Jesus was a man who was actually God and that he came from heaven to earth for the purpose of being the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, so that forgiveness would not longer come from works or sacrifice or anything that we can do but from Jesus and his death on the cross. And we know this to be true because he then resurrected himself and told us that he will come again. When the church takes that message to heart and places it deep within itself, the fear of opposition lessens and the desire to tell everyone about this good news increases.

The need to spread the gospel is so important, that Jesus himself says that it was his main reason for coming to the earth:

Luke 19:10: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

Mark 1:38: Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."

John 12:47: "As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it."

1 Tim 1:15: Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.

Jesus came to save sinners from eternal death. It was his main purpose. Sure, he also gave us some great teaching on how to behave, what we should do but those weren't the main things. The main thing was to save people. And it was not only the purpose of Jesus to do this but also of the apostles:

John 17:18: As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

John 20:21: Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

Matthew 28:19-20: Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Acts 1:8: But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Acts 10:42: He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

Jesus expected the disciples to go out into the world and spread the gospel message – the good news of Jesus Christ. Not only did he expect it, but he actually commanded it. He sent us into the world. He told us to preach and teach to the entire world. We read earlier that Jesus told Paul what he was to do. We see that over and over again:

Acts 20:24: ²⁴However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

Eph 3:8-12: ⁸Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹²In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

Galatians 1:15-16: ¹⁵But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man,

1 Corinthians 9:16-17: ¹⁶Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me.

Paul knew that his entire reason for being was to tell people about Jesus. You might think, “Well that was Paul, he was different. God had a plan for his life.” But it wasn’t just Paul. We see that Paul also told Timothy that he had to do the same:

2 Tim 4:5: But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

Paul tells him to do the work of an evangelist. To go out and spread the good news of Jesus. He should do it even if there is hardship, even if there is struggle, even if there is opposition. He was to perform all the duties of his ministry, but especially that of spreading the gospel “Ok,” you say, “but that’s just Timothy. He was the pastor of the church. I’m not a pastor.” Well then how about Barnabas:

Acts 13:46, 47: ⁴⁶Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

" I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."

Barnabas was just as drawn to be a light as was Paul. They worked side by side in doing this. In fact, it was Barnabas who brought the killer Saul to the apostles and stuck up for him (Acts 9:27). “Ok”, you say, “But you keep bringing up all these great men of faith – Jesus, the apostles, Paul, Barnabas – but we’re just regular folk. We don’t have the ability or the calling.” But you are wrong – God has called the entire church to do this:

1 Peter 2:9: ⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Acts 10:42: ⁴²He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

1 Corinthians 11:1: ¹Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

1 Corinthians 10:33: ³³even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.

1 Corinthians 9:22-23: ²²To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

Peter tells us that we are a holy people and that we are to bring people out of the darkness and into the light. Paul tells us that we should be like him and that means not seeking our own good but the good of others so that they might be saved. He does this by becoming all things to all people and he does it for the sake of the gospel. Peter again tells us that we were commanded to preach to all people and testify about Jesus.

The point is that each and every one of us is called to preach and teach, which is another way of saying to tell people about Jesus and answer their questions. It is the work of each and every individual in the church as it is the primary mission of the church. Let's not confuse the issue, as it has been confused for too long already. People are confused as to what the church is all about. Even Christians are confused as to what the church is all about. But the Bible tells us pretty definitively what the church is supposed to be all about: it's all about telling people about Jesus and what he has done for us. Let's go out and be the church.