



PURPOSE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Kevin Presley

The church of Christ was planned by God, founded by Christ, revealed by the Holy Spirit through the apostles and has been sustained through time by the word of God. But why is it here? What was God's purpose for the church. For the past six weeks, we have been in a series about the church we read of in the New Testament. We've talked about its origin, its form, its government, its membership, its doctrine, and its worship. Today, the reason its mission and work. Reading now from Ephesians the third chapter, verses 10 and 11: "to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The church of Christ is the collection of saved people in Christ. But as we have seen in our series, the Lord has organized those He has called apart from the world into local assemblies of believers to function together as a body. We noted a few weeks ago that this was in part, for the edification and strengthening of those Christians, but were there other reasons for their existence as a congregation? What is the church here for? What should we be in the business of doing as a collective body if we are following the pattern of the church spoken of in the New Testament?

Christ's church was conceived in the mind of God from the foundation of the world and in the fullness of time it was begun in this world by His Son, Christ Jesus. It was not an accident, nor was it an afterthought. In fact, there was never a time when it was not planned and anticipated by God. But why? What is His purpose for such an institution? Surely if He planned it and in time, revealed it to mankind, it has a divinely appointed purpose. It is not ours to do with as we see fit. It is God's and it is here to satisfy His objectives.

It should not be a surprise since God is a Spirit, and the church is made up of those who are in a spiritual relationship, that the church's purpose would be ultimately spiritual in nature. The church is not here to fulfill the physical appetites and desires of mankind, for Paul told the Romans in chapter 14:17 "for the

kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” The real reason the kingdom of heaven exists on earth is to provide for the spiritual needs of mankind. It is not here to entertain people. Though Christians are taught and even commanded to be compassionate and benevolent and though the church has specifically been charged with caring for its needy saints, the real mission of the corporate body of Christ is spiritual in nature. We’re not here to build great organizations, to operate as a business or enterprise, to make money, to provide fitness and recreation, or to run the civil government and its affairs. The church as read about it in the New Testament was on a spiritual mission to expand the kingdom rule of Christ in the hearts of people to the four corners of the earth. If we forget that... we have forgotten what the church in the bible was all about and what we are to be about. Let us note several things that pertain to this spiritual purpose for the church’s existence.

First, everything pertaining to the mission and work of the church is to bring glory to God. The church is not here to glorify and promote itself. It is not here to make its members rich, powerful, or to elevate them in the ranks of society. It is not here to be used by people for their own gain and their own selfish purposes. As is the case with everything God does, it is here to glorify God through Jesus Christ and every function of the church is to have that as its aim. Ephesians 3:20-21 says: “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.”

The church is the fruit of God’s scheme of redemption. It is not axillary to God’s program. It is the result of God’s program. If you go back several verses to verses 9-11, Paul says his mission was “to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Why did Jesus come into the world? Well, on one occasion, Jesus said He came to bear witness to the truth. He came to reveal the invisible God to us. He said in Luke 19:10 that “the Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost.” He came to reconcile the lost to God. He came to reverse the Adamic curse by defeating death and ensuring eternal life. Yes, Jesus healed the sick and cared about the physical plight of the suffering, but His miracles served an even greater and over-arching purpose and that is to point people to the truth He came to preach which can save our eternal souls.

One time, Jesus healed a paralytic who was brought to Him, and you may remember when those who brought him tore a hole in the rooftop and lowered the man down to the feet of Jesus, the first thing Jesus said to him was “Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you.” Why didn’t Jesus first heal him? Because the man’s sins were of greater concern than his physical plight. Many people don’t understand that even today. Jesus first forgave the man’s sins and then said to the skeptical people standing about “So that you may know that the Son of man has power on earth to forgive sin, THEN he said to the paralytic, take up your bed and walk.” You see, the miracle was just an evidence of what Jesus REALLY came to do and that was meet the spiritual needs of man and save us from our sins.

The Hebrew writer said that Christ first spoke of the great SALVATION which was then preached by His apostles (who were the beginning and the foundation of the church) and the miracles that even the apostles had the power to perform were to bear witness to the gospel they were preaching. (Hebrews 2:3-4). So, Christ’s real mission and reason for coming to earth was spiritual in nature. Thus, His apostles’ mission was also to be spiritual in nature. He told them to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved and the miracles the apostles would perform would simply confirm the truth of what they were preaching. (Mark 16:14-18)

So now, it becomes evident why Paul in Ephesians 3 said that his purpose as an apostle was to make all men see the fellowship of this mystery; in other words, to now see what God was planning all along and had now revealed in Christ and that is the salvation of the world from sin and reconciliation of the lost world to Himself. Now then, Paul said that these divine truths are made evident by the church. In other words, the church is plain manifestation of what God purposed to do from the beginning of time and that is to redeem the fallen race. The very reason for the church's existence is spiritual in nature. And Paul concludes the chapter by saying that glory comes to God through the work of His Son IN THE CHURCH. The church exists to glorify God. Therefore, the church should concern herself only with those things that God has commanded her to do and when we fulfill those divine purposes, God is exalted and glorified.

What does this spiritual mission include? Well, first, the church exists to PREACH THE GOSPEL. The church is to be an evangelistic people. It is to spread the good news of Jesus Christ crucified, buried, and risen again and now reigning as the anointed One of God; it is to spread that sublime message to the farthest reaches of the earth. When Paul and Barnabas were preaching in the synagogue in Antioch, they defended their preaching to the Gentiles by quoting Isaiah. Acts 13:46-49 says, "Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us: 'I HAVE SET YOU AS A LIGHT TO THE GENTILES, THAT YOU SHOULD BE FOR SALVATION TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.' " Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region."

You see the church of the New Testament church was in the business of taking the gospel of salvation and eternal life to the world. Just days before He established the church, Jesus told them in Matthew 28:19-20, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Luke 24:46-47 records: "Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."

I contend that preaching the gospel is one of the primary reasons the church exists in the world and when the energy and attention of anyone claiming to be church of New Testament shifts to other endeavors and other pursuits, something is terribly wrong. And I want to us to be reminded that politics may shape a community or society, but they don't save souls from sin. Salvation is a matter of the heart and cannot be legislated from a state or national capitol. It is the gospel being preached, heard, believed, and obeyed that transforms the heart and then truly reforms a person's behavior.

Paul told the church at Philippi in Philippians 2:15-16 "that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life..." That phrase "holding fast" in the other translations is "holding forth" and the Greek word means to offer or hold it out to others. That was the posture of the New Testament church and that should be the primary work and concern of the church today.

And then, the purpose of the church is to SPIRITUALLY STRENGTHEN ITS MEMBERSHIP. The church is to edify itself. The word 'edify' means 'to build up'. God designed the local church to be the means of spiritually building up its membership. Ephesians 4:15-16 "but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ— from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love." Edification primarily comes from teaching the word of God. Paul told the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:32 "So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to BUILD YOU UP and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified." Teaching the word builds us up. That's the primary function of the church is to not only preach the gospel to the outside world but to teach the word of God to church within to strengthen it. Yes, you could say that association is a way of encouraging and building one another up. I think Christians should socially spend time together and I'm not opposed to individuals eating together, playing together, visiting together, but that's not the emphasis of the early church. The emphasis of the New Testament church was feeding on the word of God and drinking the water of life. Jesus, speaking of His teachings in John 6 said that when we eat THAT food as opposed to mere physical food, it will result in eternal life.

And then the church is here to WORSHIP GOD. A few weeks ago, we showed that the assemblies of the early church involved activities that constituted the worship of God together. For example, the church is to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to one another (Ephesians 5:19) and psalms and hymns involve praise to God. The church of the New Testament regularly assembled to worship God together and build one another up. That should be the purpose of our gatherings today. The church is not in the business of entertainment. You would wonder with much of what you see going on in religion today.

And then, another purpose of the church is to PRESERVE AND GUARD THE FAITH. Paul told the younger preacher, Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:14-15, "These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." The church exists to not only proclaim and spread the truth, but to buttress and uphold it; to carefully guard it. 2 Timothy 2:2, "And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." 1 Timothy 6:20-21, "O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge— by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith."

You see, the church is designed to not only believe and practice the faith but to closely guard and defend it. Jude 1:3 "Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints." Churches where just about anything goes or churches that change their message and their convictions with the changing times are not doing what Christ charged us with doing and that is guarding the faith as it was originally revealed. That truth does not change. It is not negotiable with the world and its changing standards. The purpose of the church is to guard and preserve the faith and it does so by first, not trying to change what the faith says and second, by contending for that faith and guarding it against the attacks of gainsayers, change agents, and apostates. The truth is a sacred trust.

Finally, another purpose of the church is to BE SALT AND LIGHT and a corrupt and dark world. Jesus famously preached "You are the light of the world and the salt of the earth" in His Sermon on the Mount. Salt is a preservative and light obviously dispels darkness. Of course, darkness really is just the

absence of light. When the church fails to be a light, the community where it exists sits in darkness. The church is to be a lighthouse of saving truth and godly witness. We are to draw men and women away from the rocks of shipwreck and eternal ruin and into the safe harbor of salvation. One of the ways we do so is by living pure and godly lives before the world. We uphold the faith by exemplifying the faith. – not by force – not by political power or influence – not by gimmicks – not by showmanship. We uphold the faith by preaching the faith, defending the faith, and practicing and living the faith! All three are necessary if we are to be the light God intends the church to be and the preserving salt of a morally and spiritually rotting and decaying world.

Many years ago, on a dark, stormy night on the Great Lakes, a ship was in peril. It was near a harbor, but it couldn't see the entrance because the lower lights along the shore had gone out. The ship was lost on the rocks in a terrible disaster. Phillip Bliss was then moved to write the immortal song: "Brightly beams our Father's mercy, from the lighthouse evermore. But to us He gives the keeping of the lights along the shore. Let the lower lights by burning, send a gleam across the wave. Some poor, fainting, struggling seaman, you may rescue, you may save." Friend, these wonderful and worthy objectives are accomplished through the local church. We read of no larger organizations being founded and we do not read of the church becoming involved in other pursuits and enterprises. I think many people are tired of the gimmickry and the politics and the profiteering... Let the church simply be the church – as it was in the New Testament and Christ will be glorified.

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