

The Purpose of the Church
Part 1
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A businessman friend and I were in a nearby restaurant this past Thursday noon. As we were leaving to go my friend struck up a brief conversation with a young family seated nearby.

He finally asked them if they attend church anywhere and when they said they didn't, he asked if they knew of Southern Gables. Again when they said they didn't, he told them where it is located.

I was standing close to the young father and I invited them to come sometime.

The young man's response was a suddenly very unfriendly, conversation ending, "No"!

Apparently the idea of attending a church evoked a strong response.

Why do you attend and even participate in a church?

This week and next I wish to speak to the subject of the purpose of the church.

This week we will take something of a macro view and next week, making it more personal, we will take a micro view.

Why church?

Why not the Masons, or Kiwanis, a camping/camper club, community theatre or choir, community athletics, or an avid professional sports fan?

Before the Bronco's game last weekend, a fan was reported to have said, "Some people go to church, we come to the stadium for our tailgate party."

I thought that fairly well captured a common perception of church – it is just one of many ways to accomplish the same things – just not as fun.

Why do people join groups?

- A place to meet others?
- A place where you are accepted by others?
- A place where you can do something you enjoy?
- Maybe even a place where you can do something for others?
- A place where your kids can get involved in positive things instead of other negative activities out there?

Many organizations and activities can provide those benefits – why church?

If we look merely at the activities or the benefits to ourselves we will miss the primary reason for church.

The church is God's appointed means for accomplishing **God's** purpose in the world.

First, what is God's purpose in the world?

To restore his creation to its intended place.

He created everything that exists, including and especially people and he did so that it might live in harmonious relationship with himself for eternity.

Genesis 1 "God created...and it was good."

Revelation 4:11 "You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being."

Psalm 91 "The heavens declare the glory of God."

1 Corinthians 10:31 "Whatever do, do all for
the glory of God."

The Westminster Catechism accurately sums it up this way: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever."

But early in the biblical account of God's relationship with his creation, as early as Genesis 3, we learn that sin damaged, corrupted, and potentially completely destroyed God's creation including people.

And unless God acted in creation's defense, saving it from itself, God's purpose and creation's good would be thwarted forever.

And beginning with Genesis 3:15 we have in the Bible the plan of God to save his creation.

The rest of Scripture - Genesis, Joshua, Psalms, Isaiah, Malachi, Matthew, Romans, Galatians and Revelation - tells us how God is working out that plan.

Remember I said, "The church is God's appointed means for accomplishing God's purpose in the world."

We looked first at his **purpose** in the world?

To restore his creation to its intended place.

A people who are, and a world which is, living in positive, loving relationship with almighty God.

But now secondly we look at his **means** – how has God chosen to accomplish that purpose?

In Genesis 12 we are told that God selected Abraham and blessed him so that he and the people from him, the people called Israel, would be the means to bring the people of the world back into right relationship with God.

Genesis 12:3 "and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Throughout the older testament – Genesis through Malachi – God reiterates his intention of using his chosen people to minister to the rest of the world.

It is quite clear from the Bible that in many ways his chosen people failed at their task of representing God to the rest of the world, but God did not fail.

In perfect timing that he controlled, he sent his Son to the world, through those chosen people – Jesus was born of Mary, an Israelite – a descendant of Abraham.

And why did Jesus come?

To make possible the fulfillment of the same purpose for which he chose Abraham and the people of Israel.

John 3:17 “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

And in the newer testament we see the plan of God unfolded further. What plan? His plan to rescue and restore his creation.

But now instead of using only one family line, only one race of people, God declares his intention of using a people drawn from every race to accomplish his purpose.

Revelation 5:9-10 “...with your blood you (Jesus) purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God...”

He created the church and he called it to the same purpose:

The Apostle Paul wrote, Ephesians 3:8-11 “...Grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ... **His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known...** according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Peter said it this way: 1 Peter 2:9 “But 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.

“The **church** is God’s appointed means for accomplishing his purpose of saving his creation.”

This is huge! Do you see it in God’s Word? Do you believe it?

We, the church, are God’s means for accomplishing **his** purpose of saving his creation.

Someone has drawn a helpful distinction between a spiritual **activity** and a spiritual **task**:

A spiritual **activity** will continue for eternity.

We will always worship God – it is now one of the great activities of God’s people and will be so on the new earth for eternity.

But the **task** of saving God’s creation will one day be completed.

- Worship is a spiritual **activity** that is on going.
Missions is a spiritual **task** that has an end.
- Loving God and others is a spiritual **activity** that will go on forever.
Helping people become faithful followers of Jesus is a **task** that will one day be completed.
- Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.
An individual’s highest calling is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength and your neighbor as yourself.
But the mission of the church, the purpose, or the calling of the church is a task.

And what is that task, that mission?

We’ve already seen it.

It is to be God’s means to accomplish his purpose of saving his creation.

Here’s the way the Bible describes it.

Jesus’ purpose for being here was very clear.

It was not just to die and rise again.

His death and resurrection were instrumental to a different conclusion – to save his creation.

But Jesus did not physically stay here, on earth, until the job was done.

He clearly handed the task on to his disciples, to his church, to us.

Here’s what he said:

Matthew 28:18-20 "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

This has become known as the "great commission" for a reason. It is **the single best summary** of the mission, the task, given by Jesus, to his church, until he comes again.

Jesus said, "Make disciples".

A disciple is a follower, an imitator, one who becomes like his master.

We have tried to capture the essence of that commission in different words by saying it this way: **Our mission is helping people become faithful followers of Jesus Christ.**

Did the disciples of Jesus understand that to be their mission?

Did the believers, in those first years after Jesus went back to the Father, understand that to be their mission?

Listen again to the Apostle Paul:

Colossians 1:28,29 "We proclaim (Jesus), admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me."

Paul said his mission was to help people become like Jesus – disciples – Christ-followers.

Or again in Ephesians 4:11-13 "It was he (Jesus) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ (the church) may be built up **until we all** reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and **become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.**

Paul said the mission, the task, the goal of the church was help people become like Jesus – disciples – faithful Christ-followers.

Is that our intention as a church?

Is that why you are part of a church?

If we don't understand our God-given purpose, our mission, we will likely get bogged down in all kinds of lesser issues, usually revolving around how we aren't getting OUR needs met.

When is a church successful?

How do you judge a church successful or unsuccessful?

I have quoted this before but a short article by Don Basham written 15 or more years ago has had a great impact on my thinking.

"Given the proper set of circumstances, any church can have what is popularly called a successful ministry. All he needs is a church location on the growing edge of the city surrounded by middle income homes filled with middle income families who are eager to put down roots in their middle income suburb by joining all of the organizations representative of their middle income life.

In such a situation, statistical success for a church is practically guaranteed. With a modest amount of loyal endeavor, there soon comes into being a growing congregation, lovely new church buildings, and an ever-swelling budget, all amidst a happy program of social and religious activity. Such churches dot the suburban landscape from coast to coast. Each one gives heed to the proven philosophy that to be successful the church must follow its flock to the suburbs where the sheep who have strayed from the downtown churches can be brought back into the fold.

Yet in the midst of such easy success, there are danger signals flying everywhere. What passes for evangelism may be nothing more than combing the neighborhood for ready-made church members. The preoccupation with building programs and fat financial reports plus days and nights of thriving activity lull us into believing that the will of God is being fulfilled in people's lives simply because everything is going so well.

I know because I was the minister in such a church for almost five years. Our people's enthusiasm over the church's statistical prospects was quite understandable, but after those five years I grew concerned with my failure to introduce a deeper spiritual life which would match the physical growth of the church and its facilities. In the midst of easy statistical success, spiritual truths become decidedly intangible.

Generous hearted, loving and eager to be good church members, they were puzzled by my dissatisfaction with the way things were going. Spiritual self-discipline, power in prayer and an ever-increasing commitment to Jesus Christ were the things that I desperately wanted to impart but inevitably were crowded to one side. There was always the ever-present competition of the building program, developing property, raising money, and working to establish new committees and programs, to say nothing of the even more difficult task of harmonizing those programs already in operation. Of more immediate fascination than the power of God were the frequent announcements in the newspaper of proposed new subdivisions and plans for the extension of highways and public utilities into our neighborhood.

I could not seem to keep our church from conforming to the image of just another successful suburban church. At times I even found my own prideful spirit smirking with satisfaction over our outward growth. But deep inside I knew I was responsible for developing a church disturbingly similar to the Laodicean church in Revelation who our Lord admonished saying, 'You say I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing. Not knowing that you are wrenched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.' "

(Don Basham source unknown)

I too have felt the concern and even the frustration expressed by Don Basham in the quote above.

There are two very different ways of measuring the success of a church in America today.

The first of them is to use the same gauges used to measure the success of any American enterprise.

And many Christians use exactly those same measures.

Thus, percentage of the market, rate of growth, and raw numbers are too often the measures of church greatness.

And that attitude is perpetuated by Christian news reports and magazine articles of successful churches, and even testimonies from church leaders across the country.

Eugene Peterson put it this way, “Congregations get their ideas of what makes a (church and a) pastor from the culture, not from the Scriptures: they want a winner; they want their needs met; they want to be part of something zesty and glamorous. What congregations want is not pastors but managers of their religious companies.” (From the Unnecessary Pastor p4)

And the **methods** for growth are modeled after corporate America and the already successful suburban churches in America today.

Provide the right programs to meet the needs of the consumer-minded church-goers and you will grow.

It is the “church-growth” model of church management in America today.

And success is measured in bodies, buildings and bucks.

When we read the New Testament we find, however, a different measure of success.

It is a group of people (regardless of size) who are making definite strides in their Christ-following and who have a heart for both this community and the rest of the world.

This second measure indicates no size or socio-economic status of people or church.

The first measure of success used in some churches in America today in turn make them look more like corporations than a communities of faith.

The leadership methodology is more management than pastoral.

The style is more image than substance.

We haven't been commissioned to:

- build an organization,
- or to have more members than a church down the street,
- or to raise a certain number of dollars.

We have been commissioned to make disciples.

Our vision – the picture we want of the future – isn't one of a larger facility, or a larger worship attendance, or of a bigger than anybody else's youth group or choir, or a larger budget.

Our vision is of a congregation, a community and a world of Christ-followers – because that is the mission.

We will have accomplished our mission when the individuals of this congregation are faithfully following Jesus as evidenced by their love for Jesus, for each other and for others.

That's why we preach, teach, and conduct Bible classes for children, youth and adults.

That's why we encourage men and women and young people to get in smaller groups where true Christian fellowship can support us and sharpen us.

We will have accomplished our mission when every man, woman and child in this community is being prayed for, has heard of Jesus' love for them and has access to a church where they can participate in the mission.

That's why we encourage being an intentional witness to Jesus' love.

It's why we help plant new churches – because if every church in our community was filled to capacity three times every Sunday morning, we couldn't accommodate over 15% of the population.

We will have accomplished our mission when every people group in the world has a viable reproducing church movement.

That's why we have sent our own family members and friends to Asia, Europe, South America and other far-flung places.

Why Church?

Oh it is about much more than what we do here in Sunday morning worship.

What people typically call “church” is just the visible tip of the iceberg. It is a significant and happy part of what it means to be a church but it is only part.

Why Church?

Because we have a calling from God to be about our Father’s business of saving his creation.

Why Church?

Because we have been given a mission.

A mission more important and more lasting than any other mission possible.

And besides that we have been given a mission that can’t fail.

Within weeks of the invasion of Europe on D-Day 1944 it was clear that the allies would win World War II.

But for nearly a year the victors took casualties as they moved East.

But **the outcome was certain – it was only a matter of time.**

So it is with the mission God has given us –

There is still a battle

But the outcome is certain – it is only a matter of time.

Will you give your life to Jesus and the mission he has given us?

Prayer