

The Purpose of the Church  
Part 2  
September 22, 2002  
Dr. Jerry Nelson

One of the great experiences of life is to hold a newborn child.  
A sense of awe and even joy moves over us as we look at that infant.

But one of the saddest experiences of life is to see or even hold an eight year old child who is still infantile in size and ability.  
We delight in new birth but we grieve at severely stunted growth.

Last week I said that **God is in the business of restoring his creation.**

God created the heavens and the earth and it was good.

And God created Adam and Eve and they lived in an open, loving, fruitful relationship with their God.

**But sin corrupted that relationship and all of creation.**

Speaking of all of creation except human beings, what to us is a beautiful and marvelous created world is a mere shadow of what God intended and what will be.

At the same time that we call this world beautiful we recognize that disease, destruction and death are also part of our world – witness a forest fire, a drought or a typhoon.

Our world is not pristine and perfect.

The Bible makes clear that what is needed is not a little change here and a little change there but a total renovation.

The created world doesn't need a just little help but a total remaking.

Romans 8:20-22 “For the creation was subjected to frustration... We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. (But) “The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”

2 Peter 3:10,12-13 “The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed **by** fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare... That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”

And what is needed by the rest of the created world is **needed by human beings as well.**

At the same time that people enjoy family and friends they suffer broken relationships, failing bodies, and the ever-present specter of death – witness divorce, cancer and child abuse.

Our world is not pristine and perfect.

Sin has so corrupted, so destroyed humanity that God is recreating it. Sin has so completely pervaded, so warped, so negatively changed every aspect **of what it means to be human** that God is in the business of remaking us – not just a snip here and a tuck there as if altering a garment - but a remaking, as in starting from scratch.

We like to think we need only minor alterations to be what we were created to be but without God’s intervention we are much more like Hitler than we are like Jesus.

And so God starts over with us – Jesus said it is being “born again.”

In the emphasis on Christian “new birth”, however, **many have relegated the idea of spiritual maturity to the place of “nice but not imperative”.**

But it is not God’s purpose to populate heaven, the new earth, with spiritual stillbirths and spiritual infants.

His purpose is to recreate us and shape us to be like his Son, Jesus.

Last week I spoke of the purpose of the church.

The church is God’s primary means for restoring his creation to wholeness.

This week I speak of God's primary purpose in and through each of us individually.

God's purpose is to restore each of us to wholeness and to be his instrument in restoring others.

If we want to know what God's goal for us looks like then look at Jesus.

**When we think and act like him, when we reflect his character, then we will have reached God's goal for us.**

That reshaping may not be completed until Jesus comes again but the Bible is clear, that is God's work in us now.

And unlike some of us **God is not pessimistic** about his transforming work in our lives.

2 Corinthians 3:18 "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Philippians 1:6 "...he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

And what does it mean to be like Jesus?

Several times in the Bible descriptions of the re-created person are given:

Galatians 5:22-23 "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

2 Peter 1:5-7 "For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love."

Matthew 22:37-39 "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

An old term for becoming like Christ is the term “spiritual formation.”

One author describes this becoming-like-Christ this way:

“Spiritual formation is the progressive patterning of a person’s inner and outer life according to the image of Christ...” (Melvin Lawrenz The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation p15)

Has that been accomplished in your life?

Is God finished with you?

Is God finished with your spouse and your children?

Is God finished with your friends?

Is God finished with your neighbor?

As I said earlier, some of us have relegated spiritual growth to the “nice but not imperative” category.

**Would it matter if nothing changed about your spiritual condition until the day you die?**

**Yes** it matters because **if nothing changed it would mean that God’s primary purpose in your life would be aborted.**

Yes, it would matter because it would mean that there is probably no spiritual life.

Hear how seriously God takes the issue of spiritual growth:

Hebrews 3:12-14 **“See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.”**

Colossians 1:21-23 “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation--**if you continue in your faith**, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.”

Hebrews 12:14 “...without holiness no one will see the Lord.”

I do not believe in the doctrine popularly defined as “eternal security.”  
**If there is no evidence of growth it is probably because there is no growth and where there is no growth there is no life.**

The Bible teaches the doctrine of the “perseverance of the saints”.

What God starts, he finishes.

God’s goal for our lives is **not** a “get out of jail free” card that we redeem at death.

His goal is **not** to simply keep us out of hell.

His goal is our re-creation – restoring us to the humanity he intended in creation and the full humanity that is manifested in the person and life of Jesus.

Jesus said in Matthew 28:19-20 “Therefore go and make disciples... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

A disciple is an imitator – one who becomes like his master.

Jesus said in Matthew 10:25, “It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master.”

The destiny of every believer, of every spiritual rebirth, then is to become like Jesus – a disciple.

- Galatians 4:19 “My dear children...I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...”
- Colossians 1:28 “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.”
- Ephesians 4:13 Paul’s mission was to be God’s instrument in people until we “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

And the purpose of the church – our purpose collectively and individually- is helping people become like Jesus - faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

If helping people become like Jesus is the church’s and our individual responsibility, it seems reasonable to ask how we do that.

It seems quite obvious that attending worship services and giving, even generously, don't sufficiently address the responsibility.

It seems equally obvious that teaching a class, singing on a worship team, helping out with Boy's Brigade don't sufficiently address the responsibility.

The example of Jesus and the evidence of history tells us that making disciples – helping people become faithful followers of Jesus – is far more **individual** and even far more **intimate** than simply participating in a program.

Again Paul said it this way in Galatians 4:19 “My dear children...I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...”

It is personal and it is intimate.

What does it mean to labor for someone until Christ is formed in him or her?

Paul's choice of the childbirth metaphor was not accidental.

His concern for those people's spiritual growth was **intense**, it was **urgent**, it was **with difficulty**, it was with single-mindedness and it was **with a very definite goal** in mind.

Paul fought for their souls.

Who is fighting for your soul and whose soul are you fighting for?

A younger pastor from a large church in our city called and asked to meet.

His wife is struggling so severely from depression that he doesn't know if he can hold his family together.

He is struggling in his soul to be a godly husband in the midst of his situation.

He didn't put it in these words, but he was asking me to fight for his soul!

I have a friend in this church who struggles with a health issue in his family and a pressure-cooker job so that many days he's depleted emotionally and physically leading to a real spiritual battle in his own soul.

There are days he nearly despairs, nearly giving up on life and God.

How many in our church are beaten down by life and are close to having no hope?

Who is fighting for their souls?

How many others are "fat, dumb and happy" but a discerning eye can see the trap into which they are headed?

Who is fighting for their souls?

Paul knew that the battle for our souls is deadly serious – the enemy of our souls is unrelenting, powerful, cunning and deadly.

Here's the way God says it:

Ephesians 6:12

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

1 Peter 2:11

"Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

The war **against** our souls is intentional and deadly, and so the fight **for** our souls must be equally intentional and life giving.

**The fight FOR our souls is also intensely personal and individual.**

Again Paul wrote in Philippians 2:20 "I have no one else like (Timothy), who takes a genuine interest in your welfare."

And of Jonathan's and David's relationship we read in 1 Samuel 18:1ff:

After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan **became one in spirit** with David, and **he loved him as himself**... And Jonathan **made a covenant** with David because he loved him as himself.

That younger pastor, I mentioned earlier, asked if I would meet with him regularly.

I felt very inadequate, knowing the condition of my own soul, but I realized what I was being asked to do was to care and contend for his soul.

Two years ago and for a period of over a year I was in one of those times of life that are particularly difficult.

Jim Means, D Thompson, John Boyer and others made a commitment to fight for my soul.

Sure it's embarrassing to be weak and especially to be struggling so long – never seeming to get past it or getting it fixed.

But they have made a commitment and have kept it.

What did they do for me and what do you do for someone for whose soul you are fighting?

In a staff meeting recently we discussed this and two phrases surfaced:

To fight for the soul of someone includes:  
**Interceding for them in prayer** and  
**Interacting with them in the Word.**

**Who prays for you and who do you pray for?**

Romans 15:30-32 "I urge you, brothers...to **join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.**

Colossians 4:12-13 "Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is **always wrestling** in prayer for you, **that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.** I vouch for him that he has **a deep concern** for you...

A couple of months ago someone on our staff brought this verse to our attention again and said:

- Look at the frequency of Epaphras' prayers for them – always.
- Look at the intensity of his prayers for them – wrestling – agonizing.
- Look at the goal of his prayers for them – that they may stand firm and mature.
- Look at the motivation for his prayers for them – deep concern, love.

“In 2 Timothy 1:2,3 Paul said, “Timothy, my dear son, **night and day I constantly** remember you in my prayers.”

To the people of Colosse he wrote, Colossians “For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we **have not stopped** praying for you...

I sense the difference between those who say they pray and those who do pray, between those who pray once or occasionally and those who pray constantly.

Those who pray constantly are fighting for my soul.

Jim Means, D Thompson, my wife Barbara, and several others continue to pray for me – their prayers are a defensive weapon wielded on behalf of my soul.

This intercession for them in prayer is **not only constant** but it has **content**.

Colossians 1:10ff

“...Asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.

Not only is our intercession for them in prayer constant and with content but it is **confident**.

2 Corinthians 1:9ff

On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, **as you help us by your prayers**. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us **in answer to the prayers of many**.

This is a matter of faith.

Will I believe God's word that my prayers make a difference?

Fighting for the soul of another not only includes **intercession for them in prayer** but it also includes **interaction with them in the Word**.

There is a "with-ness" in Christianity that is foreign to many of us. Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzeneger and Peter Segall are not role models for spiritual warfare.

The go-it-alone, Lone Ranger, Christian will fall.

God made us to live in relationship with him and his church.

God intended that we grow and live the Christian life together.

Romans 1:11-12 "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong-- that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

Look at the "one anothers" in the Bible:

John 13:14 "wash one another's feet

John 13:34 "love one another.

Romans 12:10 "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love

Romans 12:10 "Give preference to one another.

Romans 14:10 "Build up one another

Romans 15:7 "Accept one another.

Romans 15:14 ""Admonish one another.

Galatians 6:2 "Bear one another's burdens

Ephesians 4:31 "Be kind to one another.

Ephesians 4:32 "Forgive one another

Philippians 2:3 “Regard one another as more important than yourself  
 Colossians 3:16 “teach one another  
 1 Thessalonians 5:11 “Encourage one another  
 Hebrews 10:24 “Stimulate one another to love and good deeds  
 James 5:16 “Pray for one another  
 1 Peter 4:10 “Serve one another.

In isolation our souls will dry up. We need each other.

My friend and I meet, e-mail, phone, and we don't let the conversation stay superficial but engage each other in what matters – the things of our souls.

Jim Means and I have that kind of relationship.

But interaction alone is not sufficient.

There are many who are good friends.

**But the kind of interaction that fights for our souls is centered in the Word.**

It is God's **Word** that God's **Spirit** uses in the context of God's **people** that makes the difference in our lives.

It means that our interaction is informed by the Scriptures.

When we get serious it is truth from God's word that we bring to bear on the situations and decisions of life.

The counsel to one another is not man's wisdom but God's wisdom because it is informed by the Bible.

Who is interacting with you centered in the Word?

Who's fighting for your soul? Who's soul are you fighting for?

I grieve when I think of how many men and women have no one who cares for them personally, cares for their soul.

350 years ago Richard Baxter wrote, “The whole of our ministry must be carried on in tender love to people. We must let them see that nothing pleases us but what profits them; and that what does them good does us good; and that nothing troubles us more than their hurt. We must feel toward people, as a father toward his children; yet, the tenderest love of a mother must not surpass ours. We must even travail in birth, til Christ be formed in them. They should see that we care for no outward thing, neither wealth, nor liberty, nor honor, nor life, in comparison to (our care for) their (souls).”

Richard Baxter [The Reformed Pastor](#) p117

My desire is that every one of us would have at least one other person who is fighting for our soul and that every one of us would be fighting for the souls of specific others.

God’s goal for us is our re-creation – God’s purpose is that we be restored to the full humanity that is seen in his Son, Jesus.

His goal is that we become like Christ.

- Is that your goal?
- Is that your mission in the lives of those God puts in your life?