

What is the Mission of the Church?

We recall that the church is:

The assembly of Christ's regenerate, end-times people who regularly and intentionally gather to worship Him and serve one another as they learn the Bible together, sing [psalms and hymns and spiritual songs] together, pray together, and celebrate the Lord's Table together.

Having dealt with the what and the who, we press on to the why – that is, what is the purpose and mission of Christ's church? Why does the church exist?

Sadly, because the doctrines of ecclesiology and eschatology have been downplayed as inconsequential and non-essential, most Christians who faithfully attend – and even regularly serve in – a local church don't really know why they do, other than that for some reason they 'should.'

The Church of Christ and the Kingdom of God

According to the Bible, the true and living God's eternal purpose in all things is to establish His kingdom and display His sovereign and beneficent reign on earth as it is in heaven.

We see this commanded in Genesis and ultimately consummated in Revelation, with the rest of the Bible chronicling this unfolding story:

- In Gen. 1:28, God commands "humanity"¹ to bring God's blessing from heaven to earth by "being fruitful and multiplying and filling the earth" with His image-bearers (1:26) who will enjoy, and, in their love for others, share the good news of God's reign to others.
- Sadly, Adam and Eve, through their disobedience to God's command, mar His image in them, which is passed on to all their offspring.

¹ Of course, I take the "them" literally as Adam and Eve (1:27). But the contemporary believer needs to remember that אָדָם ('adam) includes them as well, and thus God's binding command for them to bring God's blessing reign on earth through "being fruitful and multiplying" His image-bearers.

- Now, the earth is indeed being filled with Adam's fallen and depraved progeny.
- Instead of filling the earth with image-bearers that obey and worship the true and living God – YHWH – the world is sadly being filled with disobedient idolaters who challenge and oppose God's reign.
 - ➔ Genesis 4-11 chronicles this downward spiral of increasing wickedness in humanity, beginning with Cain and ending with an organized and communal rebellion on earth against heaven at the Tower of Babel.
 - ➔ So severe is man's natural state that not even a worldwide flood can restore God's reign on, and thus blessing to, the earth.
- The only hope for the world lies in a pagan² living in Ur named Abram.
 - Through this man's obedience-of-faith,³ God promises to restore His blessing reign to the world.
 - ➔ Gen. 12:1-3 – Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

² Many assume that Abram was somehow 'naturally' a "Jew." But the Bible makes clear that before God sovereignly 'plucked' him out of Ur, he was an idol-worshipping pagan (see Joshua 24:2-3) who becomes a Jew "inwardly" through his faith in God's promise (cf. Rom. 2:28-29). No surprise that Abraham then becomes *the* prototype for all of God's elect in Christ, both Jew and Gentile (see especially Rom. 4:16).

³ God's blessing to the world has always been predicated upon obedience, from the first Adam, to the second Adam (Christ), and now to those who belong to Him (the church). Though Abraham's obedience was imperfect, it was nevertheless essential (see Gen. 17:1-2), as it led to the bringing forth of God's promised seed, namely Christ (Gal. 3:16), who, unlike Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Israel, would **perfectly obey His Father as God's Son** (Heb. 2:10; 5:9; 7:28), and thus restore God's perfect image in, and blessing reign over, His people (Heb. 12:23), which would then spread all over the world (which will ultimately be consummated in a new world [ie. "the new heavens and earth", 2 Pet. 3:13]).

- The rest of the OT works through the history of Abraham’s “seed,” and their ultimate failure as God’s ‘son’⁴ to bring God’s blessing to the nations through their obedience.
 - Rather than being a conduit of God’s grace and blessing to the world through their obedience-of-faith, Israel tragically is not the “kingdom of priests” (Exo. 19:4-6) or “light to the nations” (Isa. 42:6; 49:6; 60:3; cf. 8:22-9:7) she was called to be.
 - ➔ If God is going to accomplish His eternal purpose of blessing the world through the irruption of His perfect reign into the world, it will have to be through another image-bearing servant son.
 - ➔ This is why the present failure of Israel depicted in the “former prophets” (Joshua through 2 Chronicles) is followed by the future hope prophesied in the “latter prophets” (Isaiah through Malachi).
- The NT teaches that Jesus of Nazareth is the long-expected bringer of God’s Kingdom.
 - He is God’s perfect image-bearer (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:2-3; cf. John 14:7, 9)
 - He is God’s true Son (Matt. 2:15; 3:17; 17:5; Luke 3:38; Rom. 1:4)
 - He is God’s obedient Servant (Matt. 12:18-20 [fulfilling Isa. 42:1-4]; Matt. 20:28 [fulfilling Isa. 53])
 - As “light of the world” (John 8:12), Jesus embodies God’s light, something Israel never accomplished.
 - In fact, Jesus said that to be in His presence was to be in the “midst” of God’s kingdom (Luke 17:21), because in Jesus the Spirit-empowered end-time reign of God has come (Luke 1:35; 3:16, 22; 4:1, 14, 18-21 [fulfilling Isa. 61:1-2]).⁵

⁴ Exo. 4:22 – “Thus says the LORD, ‘Israel is My firstborn son.’” Cf. Isa. 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 31:9; Hos. 11:1.

⁵ Of all the gospel writers, Luke is most preoccupied with the advent of the end-time pouring out of the Spirit of God in the last times. Even before the advent of Christ, the Spirit is at work, preparing and filling His servants (small “s”) for the end-time ushering of the ultimate Servant (capitol “S”) of God who

- His very miracles undo the curse of Adam's sin in the world, providing for us not only a verification of His status as Son of God, but also a 'sneak preview' of the consummation of His kingdom, where there will no longer be sin, sickness, chaos, or death (cf. Rev. 21:4; 22:5).
- However, the NT teaches "an already-not yet" aspect to the kingdom: though the kingdom of God has definitively broken into this age – i.e. it has been "inaugurated" – in the first coming of the Messiah, it still awaits its final consummation at His second coming.⁶
 - Between these comings, the exalted Christ, who has poured out His Spirit upon His church,⁷ is now preparing all things for His return.
 - ➔ Simply put, in these "last days"⁸ Christ is now, by His Spirit and through His church, "filling" the kingdom the Father has granted Him⁹ with fruit – that is, the "multiplying" of His Spirit-filled image-bearers.

Simply put, **the mission of the church is to bear fruit.**

- In John 14-17, Jesus is preparing the new Israel – the 12 disciples – for their Spirit-empowered mission after His vindication [via resurrection] and return [via ascension] to the Father (e.g. 14:12).¹⁰

through His life, death, and resurrection will bring in the end-time reign of God amongst His people to the ends of the earth.

⁶ See especially 1 Cor. 15:20-28; Rev. 21-22.

⁷ This is the main emphasis in the book of Acts, which records for us the expansion of the Kingdom of God through the church of Christ, which is empowered by the poured-out Spirit of God (1:8, etc.).

⁸ Many Christians, specifically "Dispensationalists," believe that the "end times" refer to some time in the unknown future events involving things like a "secret rapture", followed by a time of tribulation etc. Unfortunately, this eschatology fails to reckon with passages like Acts 2:17, where Peter tells us that "last days" have broken into time and space with the pouring out of the Spirit, the very thing the OT prophets foretold (note that Peter is quoting Joel 2:28-32). Also, Heb. 1:1-2 contrasts the "old era" with the new era – "these last days" – that has been inaugurated with Christ's ascension to His throne (1:3-4).

⁹ Via His resurrection and ascension, Jesus has fulfilled Psalm 2 – a coronation hymn for Israel's Messiah. Specifically, the Father has bestowed upon His "Son" the nations as His inheritance (2:8), which will become His through sovereign grace and conversion through the proclamation of the gospel (Matt. 28:18-20). For those who are not saved between His first and second coming, He will rule over them, but in punishment (Psa. 2:9).

¹⁰ Not surprisingly, the OT anticipated these very things. In Dan. 7, we are presented with a "Son of Man" figure who ascends to the heavens to receive from the Ancient of Days "authority" to rule – as the

- In 15:7-8, Jesus tells the foundation of the church (cf. Eph. 2:20) – His apostles – what their ultimate goal is: “By this My Father is glorified, that you much fruit.”

➔ As the branches abide in the true Vine (15:1-6) by their obedience-of-faith to His commands (15:7-17), fruit will come (cf. Gen. 1:28).

What is this “fruit”?

If the mission of the church is to bear fruit, a fair and important question we must answer is, “What is Jesus referring to?” Traditionally, there have been two camps:

1. Fruit is conversions for the God’s kingdom (multiplication)
2. Fruit is conformity to Christ’s image (i.e. sanctification)

Honestly, I don’t believe the text would have us make a choice between the two.

- This is because we recall the God’s purpose has always been to “fill” the earth with “image-bearers.”
- Moreover, the gospel produces fruit not only in conversions, but in sanctification as well.

And so we might nicely sum up the church’s mission statement as follows:

The church exists to bear fruit to the glory of God as she faithfully proclaims Christ’s gospel and increasingly embodies Christ’s character to the ends of the earth.

This prevents the imbalance that often characterizes advocates of mission as evangelism or advocates of mission as cultural transformation. I believe that it is *both*, and that a Spirit-filled church will naturally bear fruit *as she increasingly*

corporate Head of His people – over the ends of the earth. In Isa. 53, we are presented with a “Suffering Servant” who accomplishes YHWH’s sovereign will, and is rewarded not only with being “highly lifted up,” but also with an innumerable “seed” (i.e. the elect for which He dies as a substitute).

becomes more like Jesus, the ultimate essence and picture of what missional preaching and living looks like.

This seems to be Paul's understanding as well:

- In Col. 1:6, the gospel is “bearing fruit and growing” in the whole world.
 - Here, the emphasis seems to be on the conversions that are resulting from the gospel's advance through the missionary endeavors of Epaphras (1:7-8).
- However, only a couple of verses later, the gospel also is the means by which Christ's church “walks in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” (1:9-10).
- In Romans 1:2, Paul informs the church that God had set him apart as “an apostle for the gospel of God,” and in 1:5 that this grace of apostleship is bestowed to “bring about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles.”
 - Again, the gospel not only “saves” God's elect; it also conforms the elect into the image of Christ.
- In Romans 1:8, Paul is rejoicing in the fact that their “faith” is being proclaimed in all the world.
 - Word is “spreading” that the gospel is transforming the lives of those in the church in Rome. And so, their transformed lives are themselves a “proclamation” and “bearing witness” of Christ's gospel.
- The reason Paul wants to visit Rome is simply fruit:
 - 1:13-15 – “I want you to know brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you...in order that I may reap some fruit¹¹ among

¹¹ The ESV and NIV unfortunately translate the Greek word (*karpos*) as “harvest” instead of “fruit” (cf. NET, KJV). The HSCB translates the phrase “in order that I might have a fruitful ministry among you,” thus allowing for both the idea that fruit is both evangelism/conversions (Rom. 15:20), *as well as* increasing holiness/Christlikeness (e.g. Rom. 6:21-22).

you as well as among the rest of the nations...Thus I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.”

- In Philippians 1, Paul again has both ideas in mind when thinking of fruit with regards to his apostolic mission:
 - In Phil. 1:9-11, he prays that the gospel would enable them to be “filled with the fruit of righteousness [i.e. righteous living¹²].
 - In 1:22, Paul is convinced that God will grant him release from prison, but solely for the purpose of “fruitful ministry.”
- ➔ Again, this is both gospel proclamation to unbelievers, as well as further gospel instruction to believers.

Whereas advocates for the church’s mission as evangelism and outreach focus only on the book of Acts¹³; and whereas advocates of mission as “attractional¹⁴ ministry”¹⁵ focus on the NT epistles, it seems that a more biblically balanced understanding of the church’s mission focuses on both.¹⁶

¹² The NLT translates this, “May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation – the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ – for this will bring much glory and praise to God.”

¹³ See, for example the excellent book by Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), 2011.

¹⁴ E.g. Matt. 5:13-16 – “You [plural] are the salt of the earth...You [plural] are the light of the world...so let your [plural] light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your [plural] Father who is in heaven.” Cf. Phil. 2:12-16, where Paul says that the church’s unified conduct shines brightly in a dark world. By using “attractional” ministry, I am not referring to flashy or slick church ‘programs’ or gospel-devoid ‘ministries’, but rather to the compelling community of church life together that evidences the presence of Christ in their midst. This kind of attraction in the end times – which broke into this age when Christ poured out His Spirit on the church – was prophesied in Micah 4:1-6 and Zech. 8:20-23, where the nations would be attracted to Jerusalem/Zion by the beauty and presence of the LORD amongst His [re-]unified people (cf. Isa. 4).

¹⁵ See, for example, Jamie Dunlop’s fantastic book, *The Compelling Community – Where God’s Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

¹⁶ Of course, there are other understanding of the church’s mission. For example, Christopher J.H. Wright sees the church’s priority in relation to her transforming culture and being good stewards of the world, as God originally commissioned Adam to be. See his *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010). Though of course there are aspects that I agree with (Wright is an evangelical influenced much by John Stott’s thinking), Wright does not take into account the radical nature of the fall and indwelling sin in humanity. DeYoung and

- That is, we need not pit “out-reach” against “in-reach.”
 - Intentional outreach and evangelism is one of the greatest means of grace in the church that fosters and encourages holiness of life, circumspect living, fervent corporate prayer, sacrificial giving, and compassionate love towards a watching world.
 - ➔ Bill Piper quote
 - At the same time, when the church is increasingly strengthened by the gospel, unbelievers see a harmony between the Word preached and the Word lived.
 - ➔ John 13:34-35¹⁷; 17:20-23¹⁸

That is, fruit is the result of a balance of both knowing and growing as well as going and showing. This seems to be the balance that the apostle Paul himself maintained:

- Yes, he was passionately relentless in preaching the gospel where Christ was not named (Rom. 15:20), and spending time evangelizing the lost in the street and public gatherings (Acts 14-20).
- But he never left the churches he planted to themselves or command them to spend all their time doing evangelism and outreach:
 - After a church was planted, the most important thing was not training in evangelism, but in establishing a plurality of godly elders¹⁹ to feed the

Gilbert do an excellent, fair, and gracious job in responding to the idea of the “social justice” being the church’s main mission in their *What is the Mission of the Church?*

¹⁷ “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” We need to remember the purpose of John 13-17, namely where Jesus is preparing His disciples for how they are to live together as His new community after His ascension to the Father.

¹⁸ “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that they world may believe that You have sent Me. The glory that You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one, I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me.”

- flock the gospel in such a way that produced godly behavior as a church before the eyes of a watching world.
- ➔ This is because healthy “organisms” reproduce healthy offspring and are best at “multiplying.”
 - ➔ This is why a good ecclesiology is essential to a healthy missiology.
- The best example of this is found in the book of Titus:
- ➔ 1:5 – “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order by²⁰ appointing elders in every town as I directed you.”
 - ➔ After explaining the prerequisite characteristics of church elders, Paul commands Titus not to start an evangelism program, but rather, “Teach what accords with sound doctrine” (2:1). That is, teach doctrine in such a way that it leads to a transformed life – whether one is old or young, male or female, married or single – that “adorns the doctrine of God our Savior” (2:10). For this is the very reason our Savior came (2:11-14): “to purify for Himself a people for His own possession who are zealous for good works,” which certainly includes gospel proclamation and evangelism, but is not limited to it (3:1-8).
- The same thing is emphasized in Paul’s first letter to Timothy:
- ➔ It is the church that is “the pillar and buttress of the truth” (3:15) that God has appointed as guardian and herald of the saving gospel of His Son (3:16). And thus, as Timothy provides a godly example (4:1-15) of the gospel – the message which produces godliness²¹ - both he and his hearers will be saved (4:16).

¹⁹ Acts 14:23 – “And when they [Paul and Barnabas] had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

²⁰ Here I am taking the *kai* (“and”) to be exegetical in force (“namely”). That is, it unpacks or explains the previous clause (here, why Paul left Titus in Crete).

²¹ This is how the TNIV translates the genitive (“of”) in 3:16.

A principle worth remembering, then, is:

*When the church is healthy, fruit is inevitable.*²²

- That is, a healthy church makes disciples who make disciples, and a healthy church plants healthy churches that plant healthy churches.

Every Member Ministry

If the context of discipleship is the local church, every member of the church is therefore called in some capacity to participate in making disciples.²³

- This is one of Paul's theological emphases in his letters to the churches he planted.
 - And as we have repeatedly noted, theology ought always to be practical in our everyday living.

When an individual is "grafted into Christ," he or she is consequently grafted into His body, that is, the church/gathered assembly of saints.

- Though we are saved individually, we are not to live as individuals.
 - This is the clear and ubiquitous phenomenon that happens in the book of Acts:
 1. The gospel is preached
 2. People respond and are saved
 3. Churches are formed

²² *Just like a healthy apple tree naturally bears apples.* Cf. John 15:1-11, especially vv.4-5, where Jesus tells us, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I AM the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing." Again, it is worth noting that the "you" is plural, not singular. That is, Jesus is not merely speaking to individuals to abide in Him, but to His community to abide in Him together. This is a command for His church to abide in Him together (cf. John 17:23).

²³ I am indebted to John Flavel for the idea that just as Adam required his bride – Eve – to accomplish God's mission of filling the earth with obedient image-bearers, so also Christ requires His bride – the church – to accomplish this mission (which Adam in his rebellion failed to carry out).

4. Churches are strengthened, encouraged, and equipped
5. Steps 1-4 are repeated

We see the necessity of every member²⁴ working together on mission in many of Paul's letters:

- Eph. 4:15-16 – “And so, as we are truthing²⁵ **in love**, we grow up in every way into Him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, *when each part is working properly*, makes **the body grow** so that it builds itself up **in love**.”²⁶
- 1 Corinthians 12 – here, Paul reminds the believers that every Christian has not only been incorporated by the Spirit to belong to Christ's body (12:13), but that every Christian has also been equipped by the same Spirit to serve in Christ's body (12:14-31).
- Romans 12 – as an expression of worship to God (12:1-2), believers – that is, “members” of the church – are to use their gifts and talents in service of one another (12:3-8), and to live together in such a way that God's gospel is truly seen to be His power that brings salvation (12:9-21; cf. 1:16).
- 1 Peter 4 – in addition to faithfully proclaiming the gospel to the spiritually dead (4:6), believers living in these last days are to make the gospel visible through their life together as a local church that others may not only see, but ultimately be saved, and that to the glory of God through Christ (4:7-11).

²⁴ Again, this is why we studied why regenerate membership is absolutely essential and crucial to effective ministry.

²⁵ Most EVVs translate the verb, “Speaking the truth in love.” However, the verb literally reads “truthing.” Certainly, this includes and perhaps emphasizes speaking to one another, but is so much more, as the living “in love” together as a church in 4:17-6:9 make clear.

²⁶ Again, “love” is a community phenomenon. A church that loves one another, serves one another and is on mission together. Again, see John 13:34-35. We were not only predestined “in love” (Eph. 1:4), but we were predestined to become “holy and blameless” together “in love” (1:5). Salvation is a corporate existence.

The Local Church as Christ's Ordained Disciple-Making and Equipping Factory

Many Christians are familiar with Jesus' words of promise in Matthew 16 to build His church, even in the face of opposition and persecution.

But most of us stop there. We tuck that truth away, but don't go beyond it to ask, "HOW is Christ building His church?"

The answer is in the text: Christ is building His church *through* His church.

- This is what the whole business about "keys" and "binding and loosing things on earth as they are in heaven" is all about.
 - In the Ancient Near East, "keys" often carried the connotation of "authority."²⁷
 - ➔ This makes sense of the clear parallelism in the text between "keys" and "binding and loosing," which also is a clear picture of one exercising authority.

Peter, according to Jesus, is going to be the historical foundation of the church.

- Out of a fear of aligning with the heretical Catholic interpretation of this verse as advocating an infallible succession of Popes, most Protestants say that the Rock – foundation – of Christ's church is not Peter, but Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God.
 - Of course, Jesus *is* Israel's true Messiah and YHWH's true Son.
 - ➔ But *the text* is saying that the Rock is Peter, not his confession (as true as it is).

Meaning what?

- That the church was birthed and founded on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 when the Spirit-filled apostle preached the gospel of the risen Christ, and

²⁷ The clearest example is found in Rev. 1:17-18, where the risen Lord Jesus says, "Fear not, I AM the first and the last, and the living One. I died, and behold I AM alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." That is, Jesus has authority over Death and Hell.

3000 souls were miraculously converted, and brought into the kingdom, that is, built upon the foundation of the apostles.

- This agrees with Paul's understanding of the church: "The household of God [is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the Cornerstone." (Eph. 2:19b-20)

In Matthew 16, Jesus promises that Peter will be the Rock on which the church is founded.

Then in Matthew 18:17-20, Jesus promises that this apostolic authority will be then given to Christ's apostolic church who faithfully proclaim His gospel.

To ensure that this "apostolic authority" is faithfully guarded and propagated in local churches, Jesus continues to raise up "shepherds and teachers" who are given the responsibility of equipping the saints for the work of ministry:

- "He [Christ] who descended is the One who also ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things. **And He gave** some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." (Eph. 4:10-12)
- When we recall that Christ is "filling all things in every way" through local churches (1:23), we see that Christ's purpose of filling the earth with His glory and presence as an ever-expanding temple requires local churches who have biblical leadership who are obeying their biblical mandate to focus on equipping the saints in and as a church to be fruitful.

Application:

Do you come to church "just because"?

Or do you see that gathering together is meant to be a corporate training exercise for the mission of God through ever-increasingly Christ-like church (Eph. 4:13) learning how to live out the gospel together as Christ's new community in a dark world that needs to be united to Christ through the gospel (1:10)?

--

See Eze. 34-37 (i.e. how after this Davidic Messiah pours out His Spirit and unites His people – now a Spirit-filled army – God’s dwelling place will be with them and through them – to the ends of the earth. This is fulfilled in Christ and His pouring out of the Spirit, so that God might unite His new Israel, and advance His temple-dwelling presence to the ends of the earth [cf. Gen. 1-2]).

If there is only one Head, everything else is body.

Get quotes from Schnabel on Paul’s missionary methodology of establishing churches inwardly after planting them outwardly. Also get Schreiner’s (Paul: Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ).

--

- Paul’s “let us” patches
- All the “one another’s” in the NT letters