

What Was the Church Created to Be?

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What is proffered here is more of a reflective essay than a piece of scholarly research. It is the prelude to what I expect will become a long engagement with a multifaceted topic that demands scholarly reflection and analysis. My present purpose is to broach the subject by discussing how my interest for this topic was piqued and explore a critical distinction I believe must be maintained for the task of defining the Church and its purpose. Let me begin with a story that helps to explain my present interest.

In a graduate class on the “Biblical Theology of Ministry” a few years ago, I once asked my students, “What is the Church?” The question seemed to fall on deaf ears. Silence accompanied blank stares. I repeated the question with the same result. I caught a glimpse of one student whose rolled eyes seemed to say, “Why are you asking such an elementary question?” I persisted and finally succeeded in prodding one brave soul to answer. “The Church is made up of all true believers in Jesus Christ who follow his teachings.” “No,” I responded. “That’s what individuals in the Church do; they *believe* and they *follow*. It does not define the Church itself.” Another ventured an answer, “The Church is the body of Christ on earth who are called to make disciples of all nations.” “You’re warming up,” I said, “but again, except for your undefined metaphor, you told me what Christians *do*; you did not tell me what the Church *is*.”

Next, I asked the pastors in the group to list the top three activities that they routinely performed in their churches. Sampling their lists I asked, perhaps the most annoying question of all, “Why?” Again blank stares greeted me. “What I’m asking,” I responded is, “Why do you

routinely do that particular activity.” To illustrate let me reproduce a representative line of dialogue from that class:

Prof: (to Pastor K.) “What was number one on your list?”

Pastor K: “Counseling, I do a lot of counseling.”

Prof: “Why?”

Pastor K: (looking somewhat confused): “What do you mean, why? Because people have all sorts of problems and we need to help them.”

Prof: “Why?”

Pastor K: “Because that’s what we’re supposed to do.”

Prof: “Why?”

Pastor K: “Because people aren’t perfect; they have problems. We’re here to help them and show them the love of Jesus.”

Prof: “Why?”

Pastor K: “Well, because Jesus said, ‘By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.’”

Prof: “Why?”

Pastor K: “Why?”

Prof: “Yes, Why did Jesus say that?”

Pastor K: “I guess because that’s why he put the church in the world in the first place, to be a reflection of his love.

Prof: “Bingo! The church is here, then, to incarnate the love of Christ. We are in a world to be a continuing revelation of the nature of God that was revealed in Christ.”

The strategy behind my exercise was to demonstrate how often our churches are filled with activity without a clear sense of how it serves or relates to the purpose and mission of the church. If this is true, it is because we have not thought through what the church *is*, or what it was created *to be*. This became patently clear to me when my students tried to define the church. They almost always wound up telling more about what is done in or by the church (*ecclesiastical praxis*), than stating what the church is (*ontology*), or what it was created for (*teleology*). My point is that essence precedes function. In other words, what we *do* flows out of *who we are* as the New Testament people of God, the Church.

In an on-going quest to more completely understand God’s purpose for the church, I have sought for a suitable metaphor that would help explain what the church *is* and *why* it was created. My search led me to a familiar passage from 2 Corinthians where Paul described believers as

“ambassadors of Christ” sent on a mission to proclaim and facilitate God’s offer of reconciliation to the world.

Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2Cor 5:18-20)

From this passage the metaphor of *agent* arises. It speaks of someone who is sent on a mission to accomplish a prescribed task. Furthermore, the agent is granted the authority or power to conduct or transact business for the sender, and in fact, becomes an indispensable means to accomplishing the mission. This, of course, is true of the Church. As God’s agent it is instrumental in carrying out His redemptive mission on earth, not in the sense of adding to the work of Christ on the cross, but facilitating its appropriation by a world in need. The Church, by taking the gospel to the world, both spreads the knowledge of God’s salvation in Christ, and offers the reality of His kingdom to those who receive it by faith. This is clear in the Great Commission recorded in both Matthew’s and Mark’s gospels:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Mt 28:19-20)

And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. "And these signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly *poison*, it shall not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed. (Mk 16:15-20)

The question that now presents itself is, “What kind of ‘agent’ did God envision when he called and commissioned the Church?” While making no claim to being theologically exhaustive, it seems clear that there are at least five aspects to the agency of the Church as ordained by God:

1. The Church as a REDEMPTIVE agent of God – facilitating deliverance from the spiritual bondage of sin in all its effects by leading them into a vital relationship with God through Jesus Christ, the source of their salvation and deliverance. See Mk 16:15-20; Rm 3:24; 1 Co 1:30; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14
2. The Church as a RECONCILING agent of God - effecting peace between God and man through the preaching of the Gospel, and peace with humanity by modeling peace and becoming a reconciling agent between hostile parties. See 2Cor 5:18-20; Eph. 2:14-16; Mt 5:9.
3. The Church is a TRANSFORMATIONAL agent of God - facilitating through discipleship and Christian nurture, a spiritual transformation into the image and glory of God revealed in Christ. See 2 Cor 3:18; Rm 8:29-30; 12:2; Gal 4:19; Col 3:10.
4. The Church is an INCARNATIONAL/REVELATIONAL agent of God – revealing to the world the nature of God imaged in the person and character of Christ during his earthly ministry and modeled by his true disciples. See Mt 5:16; 9:8; 1Cor 11:1; 2Cor 3:2; Phil 2:14-15; 3:17; 1Th 6-7; Eph 5:1-2; 1Pt 2:1.
5. The Church is a PROPHETIC agent of God - As the eschatological (end-time- Acts 2:17) people of God, the Church is a community of Spirit-endowed prophets, called to speak and act as a prophetic voice and witness to the world. See Lk 24:48-49; Jn 14:26; 15:26; Acts 1:5-8; 2:17-18. 32, 38-40; 4:29-31.¹

Each of the five aspects above involves and combines ontology and teleology. They both describe a facet of the Church's being and reason for being (i.e., purpose). Each facet needs to be explored through the vehicles of systematic, biblical and exegetical theology. Systematic theology can provide the questions and categories of God's purposes in creation and redemption that are fulfilled in the Church. Biblical theology can insure that the dynamic developments of God's purposes are tracked in linear fashion through the progress of canonical revelation. Exegetical theology provides the grist for the mill of biblical study that supports and illustrates our theological conclusions.

On my part, I have begun an exegetical examination of key passages that expound the nature and purpose of the church. What I am discovering is that each of the aspects relating to the salvific work of God in Christ has at least two dimensions. There is obviously an inward personal dimension for the individual believer. However, there is also an outward and corporate dimension, as the believer is a member of a redeemed community. Furthermore, it is intriguing to explore an extension of this outward dimension. Believers, although not of the world, (Jn 15:19; 17:16) nevertheless reside in the world (Jn 17:11, 15) and are called to be witnesses of Christ in the world (Jn 15:26-27; Ac 1:8). What is clear is that the Church's witness is much broader than the preaching of the Gospel. The proclamation of the gospel is the proclamation of the kingdom of God (Mk 1:14-15). Pentecostals especially should realize that this proclamation did not come, and therefore should not come, in word only, but also in deed (Ac 10:38; 1:8; Rom 15:19; 1Cor 2:4-5; 4:20; 5:4; 2Cor 6:7; 12:12).² In Christ the reality of God's eschatological kingdom has broken in upon humanity. It has become, through the Spirit – the “earnest” of our eternal inheritance (Eph 1:13-14), a present, albeit incomplete, reality (Heb 6:4-5). What effect should the in-breaking of the kingdom of God have on this world? If the Church was divinely ordained

to give expression on earth to the kingdom of God (Mt 6:10),³ than what purposes and results do we suppose were divinely intended? These questions are not only relevant for the church today; they challenge the Church in every generation to provide answers.

¹ The objection is sometimes made that the prophetic ministry was somehow limited to the “Apostles.” However, it should be noted that this prophetic witness, nor the accompanying signs and wonders, as recorded in Acts, are restricted to the Twelve. See Acts 6:8 (Stephen); 8:6, 7 (Philip); 9:17, 18; 22:13. Furthermore Paul relates that the churches of Galatia were well-acquainted with miracles (Gal 3:5), as was the Corinthian church (1Cor 12:10, 28) without the slightest suggestion that apostles were the exclusive mediators of those miracles.

² Recently, an increasing number of Evangelicals are adopting the perspective that accepts the miraculous and the *charismata* as authentic expression of the kingdom of God for today. See Greig, Gary S. and Kevin N. Springer, eds. *The Kingdom and the Power: Are Healing and Spiritual Gifts Meant for the Church Today?* Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993. See especially “Should Christians Expect Miracles Today,” pp. 55-110; “The Purpose of Signs and Wonders in the New Testament, pp. 133-74; “Power, Ministry in the Epistles: A Reply to the Evangelical Cessationist Position, pp 197-206; and “The Empowered Christian Life,” 207-218.

³ For a thorough discussion of the relationship of the Church to the Kingdom of God, see George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1974), 105-119.