

An Introduction to Local Church Ministry

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The Mission and Objectives of the Church

Why does the church exist, and why does it do what it does? The New Testament teaches that the primary mission of every Christian—and, therefore, that of the local church—is to bring glory to God (1 Cor 10.31). Saucy explains:

“The church’s final goal in all of its responsibilities, whether to the world or itself, is the ascription of glory to the one who has created it through redemption in Christ. . . . So amazing is the display of God’s attributes in creating the church and bestowing upon it all blessings in Christ Jesus that the apostle [Paul] exults in a doxology of praise: ‘to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen’ (Eph 3:21).” Saucy, Robert L. *The Church in God’s Program*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972, p. 97.

Some might claim that the church’s overarching purpose is to spread the gospel. However, this notion is somewhat misconstrued, as evangelism is one of three objectives which are subservient to the overall mission of glorifying God. To be sure, evangelism is extremely important, but it is one of several functions of the church which derive their importance precisely from the fact that they bring glory to God.

God has created the church to be the spiritual entity through which his purpose for the present age is accomplished, demonstrating to the powers of darkness the depth and diversity of his own wisdom.

“Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; . . . to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly [places] might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph 3.8, 10-11).

By design, then, the very existence of the church emphasizes certain of God’s attributes, particularly his grace and wisdom.

“God’s forbearance in the face of human sin and His provision of salvation in all ages have been by the grace of God. The full manifestation of this grace, however, awaited the church age. For not until God’s final and complete revelation in the person of His Son was rejected could grace be seen in all of its glory. . . .

“The church is also the display of God’s wisdom in bringing Jew and Gentile together in one body in Christ. . . . Angelic beings had seen the wisdom of God displayed in the creation of the material universe, but God’s work in the church is the masterpiece by which He instructs the inhabitants of the heavenlies concerning His incomprehensible wisdom.” Saucy, Robert L. *The Church in God’s Program*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972, pp. 90-91.

As stated above, the church’s mission of glorifying God is supported by three subordinate objectives, centered around the entities to which the church must relate—God, itself, and society. To these objectives we will now shift our attention.

Worship: The Church in Relation to God

The church’s overarching duty in relation to God can best be summed up in the term *worship*. Worship is defined as acknowledging God to be who he really is, that is, affirming the various attributes of his holy character. Worship does not pertain merely to words that are said or sung; it has to do with one’s lifestyle as a whole. To live an honest life is to worship God for his truthfulness and faithfulness. To trust God through difficult times is to worship him for his sovereignty, power, and wisdom. Worship, then, is closely associated with the concept of service; in fact, the two cannot be dissociated.

The word *worship* does not often appear in the New Testament epistles, where one finds most of the Bible’s teaching concerning the church. This is not to say, however, that worship should not figure prominently in the experience of the local church. On the contrary, Christians are specifically identified as those who “worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus” (Phlp 3.3). Furthermore, worship is said to bear a direct relation both to the building up of the church as well as to the evangelizing of the unsaved (1 Cor 14.24-26). The church at Jerusalem was known for praising God (Acts 2.47), particularly in its corporate prayers (Acts 4.24-28). Paul instructed individual churches concerning their worship life (1 Cor 14.15, 26; Eph 5.18-20; Col 3.16). Finally, references to worship in the book of Revelation indicate that it is important not only in time but also for eternity (Rev 4.8-11; 15.4; 19.10; 22.8-9).

Jackson states that

“[w]orship is the climax of all Christian activity. It is the most neglected part of ministry. Preaching is vital. It brings blessing and salvation to men. Meditation and study are essential for our own growth. Prayer, with intercession and petition, is basic for victory and provision of daily needs. But worship glorifies God. It does not center in what He does for us or what we need. Man is forgotten and the Lord is exalted. Worship focuses on Who God is and upon His holiness, glory, power, wisdom, love and mercy.” Jackson,

Paul R. *The Doctrine and Administration of the Church*. Revised ed. Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1980, p. 82.

Thus worship is one of the chief objectives of the local church, as Saucy notes:

“The primary end of coming together as a body of believers is Godward in praise and admonition and then toward itself in edification as the various ministries of the Spirit are manifest, especially the preaching and teaching of the Word.” Saucy, Robert L. *The Church in God’s Program*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972, p. 93.

He later comments:

“Worship is central in the existence of the church. The words of the apostle Paul that God has chosen and predestinated sons unto Himself in Christ ‘to the praise of the glory of his grace’ (Eph 1:4-6) suggest that the ultimate purpose of the church is the worship of the one who called it into being.” Saucy, Robert L. *The Church in God’s Program*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972, p. 166.

Edification: The Church in Relation to Self

The Bible commands Christians to build themselves up, that is, to take initiative and responsibility in the matter of spiritual health and growth.

“But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life” (Jude 20-21).

Furthermore, the activities of the local church—in particular its public gatherings—are to be conducted so that everything that is done is spiritually constructive.

“How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying” (1 Cor 14.26).

“The edification of the church . . . is concerned primarily with the building and developing of the community itself in the life of faith (Eph 4:16; Jude 20; 1 Co 14:26). The goal of the edification is that each member might grow to maturity in all things in Christ (Eph 4:13-16; cf. 2 Pe 3:18).” Saucy, Robert L. *The Church in God’s Program*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972, p. 95.

“As each member receives edification through the pastoral ministry, he in turn passes it on to his fellow believer. Thus, every member ‘maketh increase of the body unto the

edifying of itself in love' (Eph 4:16b)." Saucy, Robert L. *The Church in God's Program*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972, p. 96.

Thus edification is the church's chief objective in relation to itself. God receives glory when the local church demonstrates concern for building up its members in Christ and the Word of God.

Evangelism: The Church in Relation to Society

The third objective of the church—pertaining to the church's relation to the world—is evangelism. Evangelism consists of the communication of the good news of the gospel. In Mark 16.15, Christ instructs his disciples to "preach the gospel to every creature." This corroborates with the command in Matthew 28.19 to "teach [literally, make disciples of] all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Saucy comments:

"The primary purpose of the church in relation to the world is evangelization. . . . According to the instruction of the Scriptures and the example of the early church in Acts, the witness of the church is accomplished through the total life of the members of the church, both in word and act, as a community and as individuals." Saucy, Robert L. *The Church in God's Program*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972, p. 91.

It should be noted that it is not the task of the church to convert the whole world to Jesus Christ. Rather, the church is to present faithfully the message of the gospel, recognizing that the results of evangelism are between God and man. Further, it should be emphasized that the essence of evangelism (communicating the good news) is not to be confused with particular means of accomplishing that end. As Getz notes,

"[t]he evangelical church cannot and must not allow itself to get locked into forms and patterns—either first-century or twentieth-century—that have been designed as a means to biblical ends. Every church in every culture and subculture needs to develop its own unique approaches to community evangelism. Under the creative leadership of the Holy Spirit, and using all of the human resources available, we need to develop dynamic twentieth-century churches that are creating contemporary evangelistic strategies that are built on New Testament principles and guidelines." Getz, Gene A. *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*. Wheaton, IL.: Victor Books, 1984, p.80.

Evangelism, then, is the church's third objective. God is glorified when the truth of his saving grace in Christ is accurately proclaimed to the lost.

The Ministry of the Church

How is the church to minister? In other words, how is it to carry out its mission and objectives? We have already considered the issue of *mandate* (the church's God-given purpose), but we have yet to discuss that of *method* (the procedures implemented by the church in order to fulfill its purpose). The mandate of the church is not subject to human debate or opinion; it has been established by God and does not change. The method of the church is somewhat more flexible, however. Indeed, certain aspects of ministry methodology have been defined by God and remain the same in all places at all times. Other aspects are subject to human design. It is the purpose of this lesson to distinguish and discuss both ends of the methodology spectrum.

Total Membership Involvement

The New Testament both prescribes and models total membership involvement in the ministry of the local church. In other words, 100 percent member participation in the ministry of the church is both desirable and possible. Much as a human body can only survive and thrive if all its parts fulfill their respective functions, so the church, which is referred to as the body of Christ.

“For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also [is] Christ. . . . But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where [were] the body? But now [are they] many members, yet but one body. . . . Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular” (1 Cor 12.12, 18-20, 27).

Richardson observes:

“There are no ‘lay’ members of the Church who are without a ministry in it; the Church is a ministerial priesthood of the laity or people of God. . . . [E]very layman has his part in the total ministry of the body of Christ, which corporately through the empowerment of the Spirit constitutes an organic ministry that renders service . . . to God.” Richardson, Alan. *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*. London: SCM Press, 1958, pp. 304-05.

God does not expect the objectives of the church to be accomplished through the efforts of a mere portion of the church membership. On the contrary, he has gifted every believer with different spiritual abilities for the purpose of building up the church. Saucy notes that

“each member of the church has a ministry of some type. Each has a ‘manifestation of the Spirit’ (1 Co 12:7). Some may share similar gifts but these would reveal themselves through different personalities in a great variety of ministries. Nor is there anything in Scripture prohibiting the thought of one person having more than one, producing the

possibility of many combinations. No member, however, unites all of the gifts in himself. . . . The point to be noted with all of the gifts is that they are ‘varieties of ministries’ for the edification of the body (1 Co 12:5, NASB).” Saucy, Robert L. *The Church in God’s Program*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972, p. 133.

He goes on to explain:

“In reality, the ministry of the church is the ministry of the Spirit which is divided among the various members, each contributing his gift to the total work of the church.” Saucy, Robert L. *The Church in God’s Program*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972, p. 128.

But local church ministry is not strictly a function of spiritual gifts; there are other factors involved, such as personal interests, characteristics, and style. Bugbee explains:

“Several years ago I began to explore the relationship of our personal styles (personality/ temperament) to our spiritual gifts. . . . I discovered that it’s the combination of our spiritual gifts, God-given passion, and personal style—what I call our servant profile ... —that indicates the best way to be fruitful and fulfilled in a place of ministry.” Bugbee, Bruce, and Lueders, Beth. “Maximum Ministry.” *Discipleship Journal* Issue 90 (1995): 60+, p. 62.

In other words, one a believer will find his most satisfying involvement in the ministry of a church when his activities are in line with his gifts, vision, energies, talents, personality, and style.

Note: The above is by no means a summation of all the prerequisites for effective church involvement. For example, effective ministry must be the outgrowth of a life that is both morally separate and spiritually alive. In addition, genuine acts of service must be motivated by love (1 Cor 13.1-3). It is not sufficient simply to exercise one’s gifts, drives, and talents. Real service to God involves wholehearted devotion to him, and outward ministry is merely the end-product of a surrendered life.

Form and Function

To what extent may churches and Christians employ the methods of their choice for the fulfillment of their ministries? There is a spectrum of responses to this question. Some allow themselves only what the Bible specifically commands or exemplifies. On the other extreme, some allow (at least in theory) everything that the Scriptures do not specifically forbid. There are other, middle-of-the-road positions as well. Newman comments on form and function in the early church:

“Why did the earliest disciples act as they did in the conduct of their Christian affairs? . . . Their conduct was . . . the effect of dynamic faith operating within their own Christian situation. Thus a valid distinction can be made between what they did to meet the needs of their times and the timeless principles that guided their actions.” Newman, S. A. “The Ministry in the New Testament Churches!” *What Is the Church?: A Symposium of Baptist Thought*. Ed. Duke K. McCall. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1958: 46-61, p. 46.

Schaeffer contributes his view of liberty and constraint in the modern church:

“It is my thesis that . . . anything the New Testament does not command in regard to church form is a freedom to be exercised under the leadership of the Holy Spirit for that particular time and place. In other words, the New Testament sets boundary conditions, but within these boundary conditions there is much freedom to meet the changes that arise both in different places and different times.” Schaeffer, Francis A. *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970, p. 67.

The New Testament obviously allows for divergence of church practice in different cultural situations. The key to using this liberty without abusing it is found in maintaining an intimate relationship with the Lord. Haskell explains:

“A heart that seeks after the Lord . . . will direct the use of methodologies in two ways: 1) If a person is seeking God and honoring him, he will be aware enough of God’s ways to know what kinds of methodologies will have adverse effects on the divine agenda. This is wisdom. 2) If his heart is committed to God, he will not be seeking to avoid uncomfortable situations by making recourse to human schemes. This is faithfulness.” Haskell, Rob. “The Use of Secular Methods in Ministry.” *The Covenant Quarterly* 55.1 (1997): 3-13, p. 12.

To summarize: God’s plan for ministry is that every true believer be involved in a local church, using his or her gifts, abilities, and interests; and that the church’s ministry be a balance of conformity to the normative designs of the New Testament and the subjective nuances of the cultural medium in which the church is situated.

Further Reading

Bugbee, Bruce, and Lueders, Beth. “Maximum Ministry.” *Discipleship Journal* Issue 90 (1995): 60+.

Getz, Gene A. *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*. Wheaton, IL.: Victor Books, 1984.

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Jackson, Paul R. *The Doctrine and Administration of the Church*. Revised ed. Schaumburg, IL; Regular Baptist Press, 1980, pp. 75-83.

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