

The Church of the New Testament (Part 2 of 8)

January 8, 2009

The Mission of the Church

What is the mission of the church? What is its reason or purpose for being in the world? Just as the church had a divine beginning, even so it has a divine mission. The mission of the church is altogether spiritual. First, I want to state what the mission of the church is not.

What its Mission is Not

The mission of the church is not to be a political institution. It was never the mission of the church to try to direct and control the affairs of state. Jesus taught that there is to be a separation of church and state. He said, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). There is no justification for the church or any other religious organization seizing the reins of government and attempting to exercise control over men in government.

The mission of the church is not to become a social institution. There are some who evidently feel that the mission of the church is to entertain people and please men. This has led some churches to build mammoth recreational programs, complete with kitchens and fellowship halls. Some have built gymnasiums and athletic facilities in the hope of luring people to become interested in Christianity. One church that I know about has a place of worship, which will seat about 400 and a fellowship hall, which will seat 3500. Are we able to see where the emphasis is being placed?

One preacher said it was getting so that when he heard the word "fellowship" he could smell the coffee! Well, if you use the word "fellowship" in a biblical sense, you will "smell no coffee." The recreation business should have no connection with the church. It may be the business of parents, mothers and fathers, to provide recreation, but it is not the duty or the mission of the church. When people feel they must provide recreation halls, kitchens, fellowship halls, gymnasiums, athletic facilities and what have you to induce people to come to church, they are telling the world that they do not believe that Christianity has the merit to attract the attention of serious-minded people. All of these circus-like attractions which are used to woo large numbers of people is only bribery. It is not a cut above the denominational group which recently initiated the practice of giving "trading stamps" to those who could secure the most new members for the congregation. Such is bribery! Such is not the

mission of the church!

What is the mission of the church?

The primary mission of the church is to preach the gospel. This is our paramount objective. Sometimes people say: "What about the poor and the unfortunate? Doesn't the church have an obligation to them?" Yes, it is necessary to do good and relieve the afflicted, the needy and poor, but that is not the primary mission of the church.

Perhaps you remember that one of the first problems that the church faced in the first century was the complaint that the Grecian widows were being neglected, and that they were not being fed. What did the apostles do? Did they give up the preaching of the gospel and say, "Our first duty is to take care of these poor folks and feed them?" They did not. They told the disciples to choose seven men to be appointed over the business of caring for the poor. They continued with their primary mission - preaching the gospel. They said, "It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables" (Acts 6:2). It is a worthy thing to give a poor beggar a bath and a new suit of clothes, but how much more important that he receive the bath of regeneration and put on Christ. After all, what profit is it if you are able to relieve a man's physical needs momentarily at the expense of letting him die without having heard and obeyed the gospel, and letting him go to an endless and Christless eternity? How much better to preach the gospel to him, and fit him and prepare him to live forever with Christ and all the redeemed.

To Preach the Gospel

Preaching the gospel is the primary mission of the church because the church is God's agency to evangelize the world. Jesus compared the church to a householder who went out into the marketplace to hire laborers into his vineyard, Matthew 20:1-16. Jesus also compared the nature of the kingdom of heaven to a sower who went forth to sow. The seed the sower was sowing was the word of God, Matthew 13:3-23. In early days, the church was God's agency to send preachers out to preach the word and do the work of God. The Bible says of the church at Antioch, "And when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away" (Acts 13:1-3).

The apostle Paul said in I Timothy 3:15 that the church is the pillar and ground of the truth. A pillar is a large stone colonnade or column, which supports the roof of a porch or a building, thus the church supports and upholds the truth of God. That is the mission of the church - to support and uphold the truth.

The apostle Paul also identified the church as the institution, which is to make known the wisdom of God. Ephesians 3:10, "To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God." I understand therefore that the church is to be employed in the dissemination of the wisdom of God.

Paul said further: "Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end" (Ephesians 3:21). It is God's will that glory to himself shall be in the church by Christ Jesus. Men who do not consent to this are not in harmony with God's will.

Let me also point out that local congregations of the church were the medium through which this mission of the church was to be accomplished. It was never God's plan to have some organization bigger than the church, the local congregation to preach the gospel. It was never God's plan to have a missionary society as an adjunct to the church in this respect.

God never intended for us to have some human society for the purpose of having rummage sales, garage sales, pie suppers, bingo games, and cake walks for the purpose of preaching the gospel. God intended for the church to do this work. Members of the church are to give their money on the first day of the week, and these funds are to be used for the mission of the church. What is the primary mission of the church? Its primary mission and central obligation is to preach the gospel.

It is said that if you go to Palestine, the Holy Land, as it is called, and visit the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the guide will take you to a red stone beneath the great dome of the church and state: "Now right here is the center of the world, because this is where Jesus stood when he gave the great commission and said to the disciples: 'Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned' (Mark 16:15, 16)."

No doubt Jesus stood somewhere when he said that, but it seems unlikely that Jesus stood on that little red stone. We can't say for sure, but I am certain of one thing. The great commission is the center of the church's obligation even if that place is not the center of the world. Matthew stressed that same obligation but he worded it just a little differently. He recorded Jesus as saying: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:18-20)

To Teach the Saved

But you will notice another mission of the church in the last part of that great commission, as stated by Matthew. He said, "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." Jesus said, "Teaching them." Who? Teaching those who are baptized, teaching the saved, teaching them to observe all things the Savior commanded. Thus, Jesus named another mission of the church. When the church has made disciples, then it is the mission of the church to teach them what Jesus wants them to know. It is not enough to teach them the first principles and then leave them to their own devices - they must be taught to observe all things that Jesus commanded. Therefore, teaching the saved is necessary.

When sinners hear the call of the gospel and become Christians, they have faith, but there is something else to be added. Peter said, "And beside this, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity" (2 Peter 1:5-7).

One of the principal things to be added to the life of a Christian is knowledge. That was essentially what the apostle Paul was talking about when he spoke of "putting on the whole armor of God." He said: "Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness: And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:14-18). All of these things are simply metaphorical references to the word of God. Many Christians are bareheaded and barefooted, so to speak, facing the enemy without defenses because they have no knowledge of the word of God.

How can the church bring about this knowledge of the word of God?

First, it is the duty of preachers, teachers, and elders of the church to teach the word of God, and feed the flock. In Acts 20:28, the Ephesian elders were told: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." The elders are to feed the flock.

In 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul told the young preacher, Timothy: "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." In other words, the preacher was to teach "faithful men" and these faithful men would likewise teach others. In Titus 2:1-8, Paul charged the preacher Titus to teach aged men, aged women, young women and young men" their duties in the church.

Also, the New Testament makes it clear that each Christian has a responsibility to other Christians. Hebrews 3:12, 13 warns: "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called Today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." Therefore, it is the mission of the church to teach its members and to cause them to be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might.

To Provide A Spiritual Atmosphere

It is the mission of the church to provide the kind of place where spiritual life can flourish. The meetings of the church should be the kind of meetings where the spiritual man, the inner man, can be renewed. The services should be orderly and worshipful. The meetings should not be held and conducted with the end in view of simply attracting a great crowd and catering to the wishes and wants of worldly people. It is a great mistake for people to feel that they must put on a show to attract a crowd. Remember, the apostle in speaking of conduct in meetings said: "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40).

It is not necessary to have the most eloquent speaker, or the most entertaining singing to build up the spiritual man. What does matter is to meet with a desire to worship and serve God in spirit and in truth, as Jesus instructed in John 4:23,24, and to show genuine love and concern for each other. Jesus said: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). Therefore, it should be the duty and mission of every member of the church to make it a place that is warm, friendly, receptive, and encouraging, and to show love for this world, even as Jesus loved the world and gave his life that he might redeem it from sin.

To Reproduce the Character of Christ

Another mission of the church is to provide in its members the kind of person that Jesus wants to see. The objective of every church is to produce the likeness of Christ in the lives of its members. Is the church doing that for you? Do you have the humility that Jesus manifested while

on earth? Do you have the burning zeal and love for men's souls that Jesus had? Can you turn the other cheek and go the second mile as Jesus did, and as Jesus taught that we should do? Do we stand for the things that Jesus taught? The apostle Paul commanded: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5).

That is the purpose of all our worship and work - to reproduce in our own lives the character of Jesus Christ. I once read the story of a preacher who went deep into the interior of China, to a village so remote that they could know very little about modern life. This preacher began to tell the villagers the story of Jesus - how he went about doing good, healing the sick and feeding the hungry, how he lived such an unselfish life in the interest of others, and the people said: "We know that man! He lived in our village." "Oh no," the preacher said, "this man lived in Palestine, and died hundreds of years ago." The people said, "No, this man lived among us. Come, we will show you his grave." With these words, they led the preacher to the grave, and showed him the remaining effects of an English medical doctor, who had "thrown his life away" on this remote village. This man had so exemplified the life of the Christ that when the people heard the story of Jesus, they immediately thought of the doctor.

My friend, that is one of the purposes of the church - to reproduce the character of Jesus in its members. May it be said of every Christian, as it was once said of the apostles long ago, when they were brought in before the authorities, that they "took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus." There is no argument that can answer that kind of life. If you and I live so that people can take knowledge of us, that we have been with Jesus, that will be the most powerful influence we can ever have for the advancement of truth.

To Bring Joy to Mankind

Perhaps it could be said that the all-encompassing mission and purpose of the church is to bring joy and happiness to mankind. Not as the world giveth, but as God giveth. Why is it that people attend worship? It is not because they are forced to attend. They go because they love to go. David said, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord" (Psalm 122:1). The happiest people I know anywhere are those who attend worship on Sunday morning and are found in their places on Sunday evening and Wednesday night, and at other times. These people are truly happy. Their faces radiate with the love of the Son of God. The Bible records that after the Philippian jailor had been baptized into Christ that he "rejoiced, believing in God with all his house" (Acts 16: 34). When the Ethiopian nobleman was baptized, "he went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39).

What is the mission of the church?

Not politics, or social programs, but rather preaching the gospel, teaching the saved, providing a place where Christians can grow and flourish, reproducing the character of Jesus, and bringing true joy and happiness to mankind.

By Johnny Elmore, Used by Permission