

What is the Mission of the Church?

Turn to Acts 2. We have our covenant of membership on the first Sunday of November, and I want to have two sermons on our covenant before then. Next month is Thanksgiving, and men's retreat, and more. If I plan to do two sermons on this, the first one needs to be today.

Today's question: What would occupy our churches, if we did just what God told us? If we read all that the NT Letters said to churches, and made real effort to do what churches were instructed to do, and to leave aside the rest, how would that look?

I am talking about the NT Letters here, Letters to the churches, everything from the end of Acts to the end of the NT. I assume that the NT Letters are the apostles and other writers applying the life and teachings of Christ to the churches. If we want to know what Christ and the Gospels mean for local churches, we will find that in the NT Letters.

I am going to present six options to you, and then evaluate them in importance, based on our instructions. We are talking here about the mission of the church, God's call to churches.

I attended Bible College, right after high school, and there I was taught three Christian priorities, One, the importance of a private devotional life, primarily prayer and reading Scripture; two, to love one another, a common shared life of encouraging and serving other believers, and three, evangelism, regularly speaking about Christ and the gospel to unbelievers around us.

I will add three more that I did not hear about when I was a young man, but hear them now.

Four, meeting the material needs of the world around us, taking care of the hungry and thirsty and poor and sick. Five, working for justice, and defending the world's oppressed people. And six, creation care, reducing human damage to animals and water, land and air, restoring Nature.

The first of these six is private and individual, our personal spiritual disciplines. The second is within the community of Christ's followers, serving and taking care of each other. Third, fourth, fifth, and sixth are all aimed outward: 3, evangelism; 4, helping the world's needy people; 5, working for justice in the world; and 6, restoring nature and creation.

Turn to the end of Acts chapter 2. Suppose you listed these six topics on a sheet of paper, and read through the NT Letters, from the beginning of Romans, to the end of Revelation, and suppose you put a check mark on your paper whenever you came to a command or an urging *toward all believers* about any one of these six priorities.

Suppose you took a *statistical* approach. I will tell you what you would find. You would find almost all of your check marks beside one of these six, and the other five priorities would more or less be ignored. Based on our instructions, one of these is the overwhelming emphasis, and to the others the NT letters are surprisingly indifferent.

The clear instruction is this: to love one another, a common shared life of encouraging and serving other believers.

Acts 2:42 - In one day about 3,000 people repent and are baptized in Jesus' name and receive the Holy Spirit. What changes for them? What do their lives look like?

Acts 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers [at the Temple].⁴³ Everyone [in Jerusalem] was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common.⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone of them who had need.⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

The biggest thing that changed for these 3,000 was their life together. They met in their homes and in the temple courts, they ate together, they prayed together, they sold their possessions to help each other, they listened to the apostles' teaching, they enjoyed their meals together, they praised God together.

There is not a word in here about their private lives. I'm sure private lives changed, but that's not mentioned. There is nothing in here about any kind of outreach. There probably was some, but no mention of helping those outside, or speaking the gospel. The apostles continued to preach the gospel and do miracles, but not the 3,000.

They enjoyed the favour of all the people around them in Jerusalem and Judea. The others saw how these 3000 lived together, were surprised and impressed. It was the way the believers treated God and each other that caught the attention of the watching world. And by this means, with apostles preaching, the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

The NT letters assume the church to be a new society, God's alternative society. This alternative society worships Jesus of Nazareth as the Lord of the universe, and these people live as a *society of servants to each other*, helping each other, forgiving each other, eating together, urging each other to obey Christ, encouraging and building up each other, life together.

Our instructions are to be such a society within the world, and we do not grasp how much the world needs to see that, and how effectively the Holy Spirit will work to make sure they see this. We do not grasp that such a society, *simply by existing*, is a prophetic voice to the world. This is how we are the light of the world. Not by fixing it, but by being a light, a city on a hill.

The purpose of this life together is not to call the world, or improve the world, or even to show the world the one thing it needs to see. We do accomplish these to some extent, but that's notwhy we live this way. The real goal of this life together is to love God and bring glory to God. We live this way to please Christ and to serve Christ, because Jesus is Lord.

Understand my purpose here. I do not mean to discourage those other five priorities. Of course they are not wrong, they are all good and noble. God calls *some* of us in the church to each of these. I do think we can miss the simplicity of our instructions for *all* in the church, and I would like to refresh that. So let's briefly go over the six priorities I listed at the start.

1, Private Devotional Life. All believers need to pray and need Scripture familiarity to guide them. For some this happens best privately, and for others prayer and Scripture only come alive in the group. These are both good, neither is better than the other. I do this privately, and depend on it. But the Letters never say all Christians should have daily private quiet time.

Every believer should pray. That much is clear. But there many ways to do that. Scripture leads me to say what I do not want to say. Here is what I must say: the Letters do NOT call us or urge us all to have regular private devotions.

2, Love Each Other. We start in the first letter, Romans. Rm 12: *Be devoted to one another in love. Love must be sincere. Honour one another above yourselves. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Live in harmony with each other.* Rm 13: *Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves fulfills the law.*

Rm 14 *Accept the one who is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. Stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put a stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not destroy someone for whom Christ died. Let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and to building each other up.*

Rm 15 *We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each one of us ought to please our neighbour for their good, to build them up, for even Christ did not please himself. Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*

These are most of the instructions Romans 12-15. If I were to read all the instructions of that kind in the rest of the NT letters, we'd be here a long time. Our second priority, love one another, will have many check marks after it. About a hundred.

3, Evangelism. The Lord sends workers into his harvest fields, that is, the Lord chooses some from the church and gives them the gift of evangelism and sends them out. The churches pray for these workers, partner with them financially, and treat them hospitably when they are in town.

But evangelism is not the mission of the church, or the call to individual believers. I just read to you fifteen clear instructions, just to the church at Rome, on our life together. In all the Letters, there is not one clear instruction like that telling believers to speak to their neighbour about Christ, or to proclaim the gospel. Christ sends some into his harvest field, but never all of us.

The apostles and other writers to the churches do not care if that church is growing, shrinking, or staying the same size. They never mention whether or not new people believe and come to the Lord. For the apostles, these are not the measurement of a church's faithfulness to the Lord. There are a few debated verses. There may be a few question marks here, but no check marks.

4. Taking Care of the World's Needy People. Every collection mentioned in Acts was for believers in need. Every call to financial generosity in the letters aims the money toward believers, either the church's poor, or the church's leaders, or those who preach the gospel. There is not one call or one urging, in the NT Letters, to take care of the world's poor around us.

The second great command, "love your neighbour as yourself," occurs three times in the letters, Romans and Galatians and James, *and each time the "neighbour" is another believer.*

This is not exclusive. We read in Galatians, "*As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially those who belong to the family of believers.*" Here are more typical instructions about those outside the church: "Remind the people to be ready to do *whatever is good.*" "May your love increase for each other *and for everyone else.*"

But when the NT letters speak about caring for believers in need, it is much stronger language. In James and in John, if we don't help believers in need, we ourselves are not children of God.

5. Working for Justice, Freedom for the World's Oppressed. I have heard Jesus described as a champion for the oppressed, but I cannot see it. Jesus treated people justly, he treated all as equals, and he always gave dignity to social outcasts. He taught his followers to do the same.

But he did not chase down oppressors, or teach us to do so. His words were more like: Blessed are the meek, they will inherit the earth. Jesus did not look up oppressors to challenge them, and he did not try to change the system. Are churches called to change the system?

That did not occur to Jesus, or his apostles, or the other writers. There was severe injustice and poverty and brutality around all the NT churches, in every city that got one of these Letters. It was there when the gospel was preached, and there when the apostles wrote the letters.

If correcting the world's injustice and poverty and brutality was part of the Lord's call to churches, the apostles had every reason to urge it. If correcting these great social problems was part of the Lord's call to churches, the apostles' silence is astonishing. Perhaps inexcusable.

BUT: If poverty or injustice or brutality ever happened IN the church, the apostles went wild! It must not happen in the church, *not ever!* James condemned the church because it honoured the wealthy and dismissed the poor. He said that was the church's failure to love their neighbour as themselves, which he called the royal law of God. That must not happen *in the church*.

Being good to everyone we meet, respecting everyone, that is part of our instructions. But going after the world's social problems is not included.

6, Creation Care, Reducing Damage, Protecting Nature There is no call in the Letters about this.

I do not mean to dismiss the problems caused by industry gone wild, and greed and consumerism gone wild. That damage is severe. But we may not assume industrial carelessness and greed is the only human behavior troubling our planet. Human sin not human garbage cursed the planet. Paul knows earth is cursed and groaning, like a woman in labour. It was true in the first century.

Does that change our instructions? No. A few chapters later he instructs that church this way: *Be devoted to one another in love. Love must be sincere. Honour one another above yourselves. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Live in harmony with each other.*

Private devotional life, evangelism, helping the world's needy, working for a just world, restoring creation: these are obviously noble goals, and God calls some of his children to these tasks. Wilberforce devoted his life to working against slavery in England. The work of God.

But according our instructions, these are not the mission of the church.

Hear Paul's words to the church in Thessalonica: *Now about your love for one another, we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.* 1 Th 4:9-12

Love one another. We in this church have already been taught by God to love one another. Once we have done this, Scripture urges us to love one another more and more. Lead a quiet life. Be ambitious about this, and to mind your own business. Work. This wins the respect of outsiders, and that's important. This may all sound strange to us, but that's how all the NT Letters sound.

Once in a while it is good to review our instructions. The church will worship Jesus of Nazareth as the Lord of the universe. We will live as *a society of servants to each other*, helping each other, forgiving each other, eating together, and taking care of each other. This life together is our prophetic voice to the world. This life together makes us a *light* in a dark world.

According to our instructions, our purpose is not to call the world, or improve the world, or show the world what it needs to see, or even to be light, though we do accomplish all of these.

Our purpose is to love God and bring glory to God. God has given us these instructions, and we are his people. Amen.