

Singapore Bible College

**God's Purpose for the Church**

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NT501: New Testament Survey

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2 April 2013

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## Introduction

There seems to be some disagreement within churches today about whether they should focus internally on serving and nurturing those within the church, or externally on reaching out to the lost, particularly the poor and needy. Since the answer lies in what God's intended focus is, this paper seeks to address the question, "What is *God's* purpose for the Church?"

Wayne Grudem defines church as "the community of all true believers for all time"<sup>1</sup> which includes everyone saved dating back to the Old Testament times; whereas Millard Erickson says the "church originated at Pentecost."<sup>2</sup> Due to space constraints, this paper will not discuss the issue of definition but simply adopts the latter view. For the purpose of this paper, "church" includes both individual local churches as well as the universal Church. Also due to space constraints, the leadership and functioning of the church will not be discussed.

This paper first looks at the five purposes identified by various Bible scholars, church leaders and authors: Worship, Nurture/Edification/Discipleship, Evangelism, Social Concern/Mercy/Ministry and Fellowship/Community. These purposes are then evaluated against both the Old and New Testaments based on God's revelation of his character, his primary concerns and his intentions for the church. The conclusion is that the supreme desire of God is to redeem and reconcile his people to himself. Thus while all five purposes are important, the *primary* purpose for the church should be *evangelism*.

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine*, electronic ed. (Joint Publication of Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press and Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), 743.

<sup>2</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 1058.

### Five Suggested Purposes

Various Bible scholars, church leaders and authors have studied the Bible and identified purposes for the church. Table 1 below shows a summary of some of their findings.

**Table 1. Five Suggested Purposes**

	Worship	Nurture/ Edification/ Discipleship	Evangelism	Social Concern/ Mercy/ Ministry	Fellowship/ Community
Wayne Grudem <sup>3</sup>	X	X	X	X	
Millard J. Erickson <sup>4</sup>	X	X	X	X	
Gene A. Getz <sup>5</sup>		X	X		
Rick Warren <sup>6</sup>	X	X	X	X	X
James Emery White <sup>7</sup>	X	X	X	X	X
Tim Passmore <sup>8</sup>	X	X	X	X	X

*Worship* in this paper is defined as “the activity of glorifying God in his presence with our voices and hearts.”<sup>9</sup> Paul encouraged the church in Colossae<sup>10</sup> to “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” Col 3:16 (NIV). All churches should be encouraged to worship God in this way.

<sup>3</sup> Grudem, 757-8.

<sup>4</sup> Erickson, 1061-9.

<sup>5</sup> Gene A. Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church: The Church Seen Through Three Lenses: New Testament Principles*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 21-27.

<sup>6</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 95-109.

<sup>7</sup> James Emery White, *Rethinking the Church: A Challenge to Creative Redesign in an Age of Transition*, Rev. and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 29-34.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Passmore, *Outcome: A Blueprint For Becoming an Effective Church* (Florida: Creation House, 2006), 43-5.

<sup>9</sup> Grudem, 880.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

*Nurture/Edification/Discipleship* are grouped together under one purpose because they express the same idea “to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” Eph 4:12 (NIV). The church plays an important role in this process and a mature church should reflect “a growing love, a unity of faith, and a steadfast hope.”<sup>11</sup>

*Evangelism* is to fulfill the Great Commission given by Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20 to “go and make disciples of all nations”. Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8 are key passages of the Bible and will be discussed in greater detail in a later section of this paper. Note that Grudem groups evangelism and mercy as one purpose because the Christian’s services toward the world should include “caring for the poor and needy in the name of the Lord.”<sup>12</sup>

*Social Concern/Mercy/Ministry* are grouped together because they express similar idea of showing love to and meeting the needs of believers and nonbelievers. Grudem explains that while the primary ministry of the church *toward the world* is to declare the gospel, it should include caring for the poor and needy (including both believers and nonbelievers) in the name of the Lord,<sup>13</sup> in keeping with the example set by Jesus.

*Fellowship/Community* are grouped together because they relate to “identification with the body of Christ”.<sup>14</sup> White quoted Acts 2:42-47 to illustrate the power of an authentic community.<sup>15</sup> Just as a good marriage requires work, so does an authentic community; and the church plays an important part in developing such a community.

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<sup>11</sup> Getz, 61.

<sup>12</sup> Grudem, 757.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Warren, 105.

<sup>15</sup> White, 128.

## Evaluation of These Five Purposes

All five purposes listed above are biblical and it is important to note that all the above-mentioned authors highlight that no one single purpose should be favored above the others. Nonetheless this paper seeks to evaluate these purposes against the Bible and tries to identify the one *primary* purpose for the church. To do this, it is necessary to survey the entire Bible to understand God's revelations about himself and the church.

### The Old Testament

Throughout the Old Testament, God's desire to walk with his people is evident. God walked closely with Adam and Eve before sin entered and shattered that perfect relationship. Thereafter, God was (and still is) actively involved in redeeming and reconciling his people to himself through the call of Abram (Gen. 12:1-6) and Moses (Exod. 3:1-10), the plagues (Exod. 7-11) and other examples. God's key concern is "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God" (Exod. 6:7).

### The New Testament

John 3:16 says that Jesus' mission here on earth is to save. Jesus came to save not only those who lived and knew him at that time, but also those who would live and come to know him in the future. That is why he gave his disciples the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. The book of Acts records how Jesus' early disciples faithfully carried out this commission and how they, under the mighty power of the Holy Spirit, contributed to the phenomenal growth of the church. Acts also serves to exhort all future disciples to continue in this mission of witnessing "to the ends of the earth" as commanded in Acts 1:8.

### The Role of the Church

Erickson pointed out that "the church was not brought into being by our Lord simply to exist as end in itself. Rather, it was brought into being to fulfill the Lord's intention for it.

It is to carry on the Lord's ministry in the world – to perpetuate what he did and to do what he would do were he still here.”<sup>16</sup> There is neither ambiguity about the Lord's intention for the church - Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8 – nor about Jesus' ministry – John 3:16. Thus while it is important for the church to worship God and serve its own members, the primary reason for its existence is to serve the world *in the same way that Christ did while he was here on earth.*

### Primary Purpose is Evangelism

In Luke 5:31-2 (NIV) Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” And in Luke 15, Jesus told a series of three parables about the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. All these clearly reflect Jesus' “supreme desire to seek and save the lost”<sup>17</sup>. Jesus cares about the ninety-nine sheep and the older son, but he rejoices *even more* over the finding/return of the lost one. Thus the *primary* purpose for the church must be to care *more* about *evangelizing to the lost* than about those already found.

But caution is necessary, as highlighted by Grudem. Firstly making any one purpose *primary* risks resulting in the neglect of the other purposes.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, churches making evangelism a priority risks producing immature Christians.<sup>19</sup> Churches must still help its members grow in Christlikeness because the life testimony of the evangelist is just as important as, if not more than, the verbal message he carries. Thirdly, individuals are different from churches. While the church is the body of Christ, Christians are its body parts

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<sup>16</sup> Erickson, 1061-9.

<sup>17</sup> Marshall, I. Howard, “Luke,” *New Bible Commentary 21<sup>st</sup> Century Edition*, electronic ed, ed D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer and G. J. Wenham (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Laridian Electronic Publishing, 1983 & 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Grudem, 757.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 758.

and each is gifted with unique spiritual gifts and abilities. Thus the primary purpose for the *church* may not be the primary purpose for the *individual* Christian. Reverend Edmund Chan, Leadership Mentor of Covenant Evangelical Free Church in Singapore, a discipling church, is a good example.

### **Reverend Edmund Chan, Leadership Mentor of a Discipling Church**

Edmund Chan wrote that “By God’s grace, I am called to *pastor a discipling church*, and through it, to leave behind a worthwhile legacy in Singapore and beyond.”<sup>20</sup> It is evident that Chan has indeed been gifted with a unique set of spiritual gifts and abilities to enable him to fulfill his specific calling. However, a few important things must be noted.

Firstly, *not all* pastors are similarly called and gifted. Secondly, Chan’s idea of a discipling church is *not inward-looking* as cautioned by Grudem and others, that churches making edification a priority risk producing “Christians who know much Bible doctrine but have spiritual dryness in their lives because they know little of the joy of worshiping God or telling others about Christ.”<sup>21</sup> Chan’s discipling begins and ends with evangelism – “Discipling is the process of bringing people into right relationship with God; and developing them to full maturity in Christ through intentional growth strategies, that they might multiply the entire process in others also.”<sup>22</sup> His “dream” church budget reflects an emphasis on missions.<sup>23</sup> Finally Chan acknowledges the importance of the other purposes – “the Five Pillars of prayer, worship, cells, equipping and outreach.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Edmund Chan, *Built to Last: Towards a Discipling Church*. (Singapore: Covenant Evangelical Free Church, 2001), 16.

<sup>21</sup> Grudem, 758.

<sup>22</sup> Chan, 39-40.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

## Conclusion

This paper seeks to answer the question “What is *God’s* purpose for the Church?” Five purposes were identified: Worship, Nurture/Edification/Discipleship, Evangelism, Social Concern/Mercy/Ministry and Fellowship/Community. These five purposes were evaluated against the Bible based on God’s revelation of his character and his intentions for the church.

The conclusion is that in order for the church to fulfill the Lord’s intention for it – to carry on the Lord’s ministry in the world – its *primary* purpose must be evangelism. This is because the supreme desire of God is to redeem and reconcile his people to himself.

Nonetheless it is noted that the other four purposes are also important. Also, individuals are different from churches and so the purpose for each individual Christian may not necessarily be the same as the primary purpose for the *church*, as illustrated by the example of Rev Edmund Chan.

These findings are significant and have great impact on churches.

First and foremost, churches in general should focus on its primary purpose of evangelism, but at the same time not neglect the other four purposes of Worship, Nurture/Edification/Discipleship, Social Concern/Mercy/Ministry and Fellowship/Community.

Secondly, this priority on evangelism should be reflected in how the church allocates its *time and resources* (including both *financial and human* resources). For instance, churches should not *only* gather for weekly worship services and in small fellowship or Bible study groups, but also gather *more* to witness to the lost. Churches should allocate a *larger* portion of its funds to missions and evangelism as compared to meeting internal needs. *More* of its members should be involved in outreach as compared to serving in its worship team, edification team or any other teams devoted to meeting the internal needs of church members.

Thirdly, churches should not be inward looking, focusing on internal needs. It should instead be *outward looking* – focusing on meeting both spiritual and non-spiritual needs outside the church.

Fourthly, in turning its attention to reaching the lost, the church must realize that while it is good to devote resources to caring for the poor and needy, *more* resources should be devoted to caring for the poor and needy *as a means of bringing to them the gospel of salvation*.

Fifthly, gathering as a community must not be just for the social or edification needs of those gathered, but must *result in spurring one another towards love and good deeds* (Heb 10:24-5), *including witnessing*.

Sixthly, while only Christians can truly worship God in spirit and in truth, effort must be made to welcome nonbelievers to the church's weekly services because "worship can be a powerful witness to them if God's presence is felt and if the message is understandable."<sup>25</sup>

Seventhly, the purpose of evangelism is not simply to make converts, but to make disciples. Therefore, intentional effort must be put into following up with new believers and assimilating them into the local church community.

Eighthly, the primary purpose for the church being evangelism does not mean that the primary purpose for every individual in the church must also be evangelism. For instance, a person called and gifted in worship leading should focus on worship as his primary purpose.

Finally, every church is unique. Some churches may be called by God to focus on a purpose other than evangelism, as in the case of Rev Edmund Chan. Thus, pastors must be sensitive to God's leading.

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<sup>25</sup> White, 128.

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