

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

WORSHIP, EDIFICATION, AND WITNESS

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Prior to pastoral ministry, I taught in a school that saw manageable and measurable objectives as the key to turning around failing public schools. They yielded impressive initial results by pushing a mission of “Excellence, no Excuses,” even being name-dropped by a president.⁸¹

This progress makes sense to us, even if our names have never claimed headlines. Whether you are a potty-training mom geared up for war or a CEO steering a massive corporate ship, a clear mission is pivotal to avoiding a mess. The most productive among us know to keep objectives manageable, measurable, and close to that which is central.

What about the church’s mission? More than the individual Christian’s calling, what are we called to do as a whole and keep at the center of our activity?

God’s Word blows our manageable and measurable expectations completely out of the water. The church’s mission is breathtakingly ambitious: worship, edification, and witness.⁸²

Worship

From the beginning, God made mankind and then formed a people to be his treasured kingdom of worshipers who were called to invite all nations to join in their song of gladness (Exod. 19:5-6). So too the new covenant church.

Our churches consist of living stones, joined in Christ as a temple, “to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5). We were made and saved for worship.

⁸¹ Barack Obama, “On Education Reform at the National Urban League Centennial Conference.” Delivered at Washington Convention Center. 07/29/2010. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamaurbanleaguecentennial.htm>

⁸² Or as Edmund Clowney put it, “The church is called to serve God in three ways: to serve him directly in worship; to serve the saints in nurture; and to serve the world in witness.” Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 117.

What is our central aim? The glory of God! The zenith of our worship is in the gathered church as the Scriptures are read and proclaimed, the sacraments celebrated, prayers lifted, and songs crescendo to the glory of God.

Edification

The church exists to worship God and build up the church, not merely numerically, but in the way that Jesus promised to his disciples. “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). Jesus starts his church, nurtures his church, and unstoppably preserves his church. This is Christ’s work that he accomplishes through us.

The Great Commission specifies that the primary way we participate in the edification of the church is through the making of disciples by “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20).⁸³ The local church is the main context where believers teach one another in conversation and song (Col. 3:16), and especially through the preaching of the Word (1 Tim. 4:6-16).

Each member, however, is gifted differently with an integral role to play in the edification of the church as they use their spiritual gifts and practice the “one anothers” (Rom. 12). It is only when each part is working properly that the church truly builds itself up in love (Eph. 4:15-16). This is not the job of the pastor, deacon, or small group leader only; this is your task. Every member works, but none does so independently. Like the apostles, we are utterly dependent on the purifying and unifying work of the Spirit (Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:6-8).

The mission of the church is to edify, but this is not in contradiction to its goal of worship. The bride is beautified, branches vivified, living-stones put into place, and members continue to grow to glorify God.

Witness

In Revelation, John sees churches symbolically displayed as lampstands shining the gospel into a dark and sinful world (Rev. 1:12-20). Even as the Father sent Jesus as the Light of the World (John 20:21), so Jesus sends us as his light bearers into our communities (Acts 13:47). We are called to make disciples and to proclaim the gospel to the lost, baptizing those who come to Christ. And we see in the pages of the New Testament how this comes about: God gifts men (Eph. 4:11), sent from local churches (Acts 13:1-3), to take the gospel to new areas, planting churches and making disciples. While none of us would claim the role or

⁸³ Going, baptizing, and teaching are all aspects of the main imperative of the Great Commission: make disciples. Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Nottingham: InterVarsity, 2004), 355.

authority of Paul, his example, along with that of his many co-workers, provides us with an inspiring missional model to follow.⁸⁴

The witness of the church is not insular; it is missional in nature. Our commission from Christ requires that we preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations (Mark 13:10; Matt. 28:19). One reason Christ has not yet returned is that he has more sinners to save! Churches must engage their neighborhoods, work to spread the gospel in their area, and send gospel messengers to the ends of the earth in partnership.

But once again, this is not in competition with the primary aim of worship; we are inviting others to join in our eternal song of praise! As John Piper says,

Missions⁸⁵ is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.⁸⁶

This mission is worldwide, this mission includes all peoples, and this worship aims at the adoration of an incomparably awesome God.

The biblical mandate and model for mission is clarifying. The mission of the church is not to transform the culture or to eradicate suffering from this world (as wonderful as those goals are); our mission is to worship God, edify the church, and witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We do pray for the good and peace of our world, but we keep our mission targeted on our God-appointed task.

In his kindness, God will uniquely give burdens to individual Christians in how they are to conduct themselves as salt and light in the world, but our greatest energies and ambitions must be towards the worship of God, edification of the church, and the salvation of the lost through Christ's body, the church.

What most animates you? What inspires your dreams? What do you long to see happen in your city and the world? May it be that the mission of the church is what most excites you.

⁸⁴ Consider, for example, Barnabas who is only called an apostle after being appointed to join Paul on his first missionary journey (Acts 14:4, 14. See also Matt. 28:19; Rom. 16:7; 1 Cor. 4:1; 15:5-8; Eph. 4:11). Thirty-eight different collaborators traveled with Paul from a diversity of backgrounds and gifting, 18% of whom were women. And this is only those who are recorded! Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Nottingham: InterVarsity, 2004), 1426-28; Don Dent, *The Ongoing Role of Apostles in Missions* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2019), 103-104.

⁸⁵ Here Piper uses "missions" in the sense of gathering worshipers throughout the world.

⁸⁶ John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010, 3rd ed), 35.

What a mission! Manageable? Hah! Measurable? No way! Our inadequacy would crush us if not for God's faithfulness. But God has graciously chosen the weak for this powerful work. We get to be his treasured possession and worshipful community. We get to build one another up, immersed in the help of the Spirit. And we get to radiate the gospel to those who live in darkness. And, happily, our mission is unstoppable! Christ will remain with us unto the end of the age, the Spirit will build us up into the full stature of Christ, and our Father's plans cannot be thwarted.

May our greatest ambitions, energies, and zeal be directed towards the incredible mission we've been given.