



Getting Back to Church

Lesson 2: The Purpose of the Church

Introduction

There are many local churches today who feed and clothe the poor and homeless through soup kitchens and donation centers at the church facility. There are some local churches who focus their efforts on bringing about political reform to our society. Still other local churches focus on reaching their community through offering community services and support networks for the local people. While churches focus their time and attention on these good things, the question that must be asked is, “Is that the primary purpose of the local church?” In our previous lesson we learned what the church is. In this lesson we are going to focus on the local church and study the purpose of the local church.

The Primary Purpose

At RBC, we have identified the primary purpose of the church in the following statement:

Our purpose is this: To bring glory to God. The boldest theme of Scripture and the highest purpose of the church is to glorify the triune God by magnifying His name in the world. Jesus was given a singular purpose by His Father, and He has given that purpose to His church—to display the glory of God to all people. Our purpose is a gospel purpose because the glory of God is most wonderfully displayed in the reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

While social services and social reform have their places in this world, the Lord has not given that as the main responsibility of the local church. Every individual Christian, as an active member of society, is called to personally help those in need, pray for rulers, and promote justice in this evil world. Christians have a civic duty to vote and pay taxes (Matt. 22:21). They are to seek to do good to all people (Gal. 6:10). However, those duties are not the primary purpose and responsibility of the local church. The primary purpose of the church is to glorify God.

Charles Bridges says, “The Church is the mirror, that reflects the whole effulgence of the Divine character. It is the grand scene, in which the perfections of Jehovah are displayed to the universe.”¹ The local church was established by God, and it exists for the glory of God. It does not exist for the seeking unbeliever, and it does not exist to satisfy the needs of the believer. God has saved sinners and established the church to put the glory of His name on display. The church’s main priority must be God and His glory. Paul exclaims in Romans 11:36, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” The church cannot be drawn away from the primary purpose of bringing glory to God.

¹ Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1980), 1.

The Means of Fulfilling the Church's Purpose

If the primary purpose of the church is to glorify God, then a follow-up question is, "How is that to be done?" There are three ways in which the church fulfills this purpose.

1. The Exaltation and Worship of God

At RBC, our mission statement says:

Our desire is to exalt in the God of the gospel through meaningful Spirit-filled worship, both individually and corporately. As gospel-transformed individuals we exalt God as we worship Him through sincere reverence, prayer, and joyful obedience. Corporately, we exalt God as we gather together and offer our adoration and declare His greatness.

Focusing on the local church, we exalt God by gathering together to worship Him in the ways He has revealed in the Bible. This is called the regulative principle. This means our worship of God must be informed by what He commands in His Word. Jesus said in John 4:24 that those who worship God must worship Him "in spirit and truth." This means true worship of God in the local church must be both from the heart and in accordance with the truth that God has revealed in the Bible. Worship, then, is done by reading the Bible, preaching the Bible, praying the Bible, singing the Bible, and seeing the Bible.² Ligon Duncan says, "God's Word itself must supply the principles and patterns and content of Christian worship. True Christian worship is by the book. It is according to Scripture. The Bible alone ultimately directs the form and content of Christian worship."³ When we, as a local church, meet on Sunday mornings, we worship in accordance with how God commands worship so that He might be glorified in our time together.

2. The Edification of the Saints

In the local church, God is glorified when His people are edified. Our mission statement at RBC says:

True edification and change is only accomplished through the gospel as revealed in Scripture. Therefore, it's our desire to edify and promote growth in the saints through the gospel by faithfully preaching and teaching the Scriptures, cultivating and training qualified church leaders, patiently and persistently discipling one another, and exercising our spiritual gifts for the benefit and building up of the body of Christ.

Edification must happen in the local church for God to be glorified. How does this edification happen?

A. Through Preaching and Teaching God's Word

Paul commanded Timothy to "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2). Jesus prayed to the Father, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). Because God's word is true and sanctification happens in the truth, it is the responsibility of every local church to preach the word of God. Paul also says, "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord . . . For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:5–6). When Jesus Christ as Lord is proclaimed in the church, it puts the glory of God on display. The word of God must be preached for edification to happen and for God to be glorified in the church.

² Ligon Duncan, *Does God Care How We Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), 76–82.

³ *Ibid*, 11.

B. Through Training Qualified Leaders

On the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul, he not only preached the gospel so that individual sinners could be saved, but he also established churches. However, those churches could not survive without qualified leaders. Therefore, Paul trained and appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23). He even had his own protégé in whom he was training for leadership—Timothy. Paul gave Timothy instructions for leadership in the church in his first letter to Timothy. Paul established the two offices of elder and deacon and gave qualifications for those who serve in those offices (1 Tim. 3:1–13). The elder’s responsibility is to teach the word of God (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9). The deacon’s responsibility is to be an assistant to the elders in the work of the ministry.

Paul knew the importance of training qualified leaders in the church. That is why he commanded Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2, “what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” Timothy’s responsibility as the pastor at the church at Ephesus was to train up faithful men who will be able to teach others. Since edification happens through teaching God’s word, and the responsibility of the elders of the church is to teach God’s word, edification happens through qualified leaders who teach and preach, and lead God’s people (Acts 20:27–28; 1 Tim. 4:6, 16), and in this God is glorified.

C. Through Discipling One Another

Jesus gave the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19–20 in which He commands all believers to make disciples. Making a disciple does not just mean a sinner gets saved. The Greek verb translated “make disciples” (*mathēteuō*) has the idea of a *learning believer*. This is why Jesus gave the command in verse 20, “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Edification happens by discipling one another through teaching one another the word of God (Col. 3:16).

Another aspect of discipleship that is often overlooked in the church is church discipline. The positive side of discipleship is teaching the word of God. The other side of discipleship is confronting and correcting sinful behavior in a fellow Christian (Gal. 6:1; James 5:19–20). Why is this so important for the church? Because Jesus takes the purity of the church seriously. Jesus gave the instructions for church discipline in Matthew 18:15–17.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

This four-step process is given by Christ not only so the sinner can be called to repentance and restoration, but also for the spiritual health and purity of the church. When sin is ignored in the church, it will fester and spread throughout the entire church (1 Cor. 5:6–7). John MacArthur states, “The problem with the church today is not that it’s out of step with the culture or it’s too old fashioned. The problem is that it has lost its interest in holiness.”⁴ Edification in the church happens through discipling one another in the word of God and correcting sinful behavior in fellow Christians.

⁴ John MacArthur, *Your Local Church and Why It Matters* (Panorama City, CA: Grace To You, 2019), 27.

D. Through Spiritual Gifts

At the moment of salvation, God gives every Christian a spiritual gift to be used for the edification of the church (1 Cor. 12:11, 28). Different people are given different gifts. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:4, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” The Greek word “common good” has the idea of bringing together or benefitting all. Paul goes on and says in 1 Corinthians 14:12, “So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.” As interdependent people, Christians need each other for unity and edification to take place in the local church.

What are the spiritual gifts that God gives? Peter helps by identifying two different categories of gifts in 1 Peter 4:11. These two categories are speaking gifts and serving gifts. Some gifts that God gives are to be used for speaking to the church while other gifts are to be used to serve the church. What is the outcome when all Christians are using their spiritual gifts in the local church? Peter says in 1 Peter 4:11, “in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.” When all members of a local church are using the spiritual gift that God has given them, God is glorified. The purpose of spiritual gifts is both to edify and mature the church, and to glorify God in serving others.

3. The Evangelization of the Lost

Our mission statement at RBC says:

We readily recognize the fallen world in which we presently reside and the desperately wicked nature of mankind. Therefore, with great compassion and purposeful clarity, we labor to evangelize the lost with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We strive to fulfill the Great Commission by making disciples and proclaiming Christ to every person, pleading for all to embrace Christ as Lord and Savior.

The church exists in the midst of an evil world. While the church is not to be a part *of* the world, the church is called to be *in* the world (John 15:19; 17:14–19). Jesus left the church in the world with one main task to execute—preach the gospel (Acts 1:8; 1 Pet. 2:9). The apostle Paul knew the power of the gospel when he said in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” The church has been given the responsibility of preaching the gospel to lost sinners. Jeffrey D. Johnson says, “The main purpose and mission of the church is preaching the gospel.”⁵ As the church seeks to fulfill the Great Commandment given by Christ in Matthew 28:19–20, it must make disciples first and foremost by proclaiming the good news of the gospel.

When lost sinners get saved, God is glorified. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:15, “For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.” As the grace of God through the gospel spreads to more and more people, those who are saved give thanks to God for their salvation, and God is glorified.

The primary purpose of the church is to bring glory to God. The means by which the church brings glory to God is by exalting Him, edifying His people, and evangelizing the lost. Our local church must never lose our focus on the primary purpose for which God has placed us in this world.

⁵ Jeffrey D. Johnson, *The Church: Her Nature, Authority, Purpose, and Worship* (New Albany, MS: Media Gratia, 2020), 92.