

What if the church misses its purpose?

By Bob Young

I fear that the modern church has lost sight of its purpose. Because we have not seen and grasped God's purpose for the church, I fear that we are in danger of substituting the "means" for the "end." What was the purpose of the early church? The question is not about what they did; the question asks why they did it. Reading the early chapters of the book of Acts one can develop an extensive list of things the early church did—fellowship, prayer, breaking bread, teaching, assembly, eating together, worship, benevolence.... This short list comes only from Acts 2. Indeed, the list is much longer. But why? Why did the early church do these things?

None of these was the purpose of the early church. The early church existed for a higher purpose. We may do well in our contemporary world to imitate the activities of the early church, but we will not restore the early church until we have the same purpose they had. Even if we do exactly the same things they did, activity without the purpose in mind will lack power. We must identify and restore the key that motivated them and was the guiding star of their lives. We must understand the purpose that was sufficient to cause them to endure and rejoice in suffering, to face death confidently, and to proclaim boldly in the face of opposition. We typically think such endurance was a matter of faith, and indeed it was. But behind the faith that endured is the question of purpose. Faith is not pointless. Faith in Jesus as King demands that followers devote their lives to his purpose. The life of a disciple (Christian) is about the same things Jesus' life was about—dedicated to the same cause and end he was dedicated to.

The contemporary church has come to define itself by the means (what it does) and seldom asks about the end results. The church does not exist to worship and study and fellowship. These are essential activities but they are not the overarching purpose of the church. The church does not exist merely to do these things. The church does these things because they help it accomplish its purpose.

Consider these verses from the early chapters of Acts: 1:3; 2:23-24, 30-32; 3:15; 4:2, 10, 33; 5:31, 42; 8:4. What themes do you identify? These and other verses throughout Acts say that the message being preached was Jesus—his life, that he was alive, that he was resurrected. The early Christians were preaching the death and resurrection of Jesus; they were preaching in his name. That was the purpose of the early church; that is the purpose of the church today. The message preached was and is the power of salvation. The church exists as the declaration of God's wisdom to bring all kinds of people together in the one body. God's purpose is a saving purpose. Jesus came to seek and save lost ones. The power to salvation is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The goal is salvation. The end of our faith is the salvation of our souls. We do not seek faith simply so we can rejoice that we have faith and that "we have arrived." Interestingly, the end seldom occurs within the four walls of the church building. Church building activities tend to be means. The end mostly occurs outside our church buildings.

Write a mission statement for your church. What is the ultimate goal? What is the desired result? Why does the church exist? Without an answer to this question, how would you know if the church is succeeding? Many churches consider themselves faithful but they have not attempted to talk to a non-Christian about Jesus in years. The measure of faithfulness is not weekly worship done properly, Bible class attendance, or even participation in some “extra” activities. The measure of our faithfulness and love for Jesus is whether we are participating in the accomplishment of his will. Are we trying to do what he wants done? Not only what he wants done in our own individual lives, although that is important. Are we trying to get done what he wants done in our world? Are we involved in the global mission and search? Are we doing something more than “keeping house”?

We must go beyond keeping house. Keeping house will not cut it. God does not want a clean house, he wants clean hearts. He does not want more buildings; he wants more souls saved. Let us get back to the ends and quit measuring ourselves by the means.

P.S. By the way, have you considered how little direction God gives concerning means? Let us proclaim the gospel, urge that people obey the gospel, urge that people be faithful to the new life commitment they make in obeying the gospel, and teach them to connect weekly with the gospel message which is remembered in the Supper. Let us get back on track with our purpose so that our message will be that of the early church.

I hear sermons that hardly touch the word of God, let alone getting to the germ and core of bringing people to Christ and keeping people connected to Christ. When we restore the purpose of the church, we will quit the silliness of seeing only the means. We will cease doing everything for ourselves and get serious once again about the purpose that was big enough and important enough that God sent his only Son to die for our sins, and for the sins of the world!