

A Gathered People: What is our Purpose?

By Bob Young

Why the church?

Christ came to establish his church.

Church is, in one sense, a repository of the saved.

Christ died for the church, purchased it with his own blood.

There is a unique relationship between Christ and the church: Eph. 5:22-32.

Christ loves the church; the church is bride of Christ.

Christ makes the church holy, clean, washed, blameless, without blemish.

All of this shouts organism, organic, living, vibrant, relational, relationships.

Yet, we have institutionalized the church.

This is not church bashing. I love the church. Grew up in the church, precious memories. This is an effort to help us understand the value, greatness, place of the church.

God has a purpose and that purpose is centered in the church, finds fulfillment in the church, Eph. 1:3-14. This is Paul's description of a living, vibrant, organism. That is Paul's description of God's purpose in the church. The purpose of God is an eternal purpose.

Because we see the church as institution, we have developed an institutional way of reading Scripture. We have focused on one picture of the people of God to the exclusion of an equally valid picture—that of the kingdom. We could be helped in our effort if we were to study more carefully the concept of kingdom.

To illustrate what I am saying, let me suggest that we have a church hermeneutic. We talk about becoming a Christian rather than being a Christian. We focus on the initial steps but do not focus on the process.

By the way, was Christian a derisive name? Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:17

What we have done is illustrated by our use of Christian (3 times in the NT) rather than disciple (97 times in the NT). We do not talk about being disciples and thus we ignore much of what the Bible teaches about discipleship. We talk about church and almost not at all about kingdom. We talk about Savior instead of King. Jesus must be our Lord before he can be our Savior, but we do not put lordship ahead of Savior.

We talk about church membership rather than kingdom citizenship, but Paul in Philippians is talking kingdom and citizenship.

Kingdom, 156, 122 in gospels.

Church, 109, 3 in gospels.

So should we conclude that God really intended to establish a church and the kingdom went by the wayside?

Or that the church and the kingdom are the same?

Difficult, complex questions. Important.

There is overlap. The kingdom is an OT/NT concept. Kingdom of priests. The church is part of the kingdom, but biblically not all in the kingdom are in the church, Matt. 8:12. Practically, today those in the kingdom are in the church universal.

The church is the assembled people of God, assembled for a purpose, assembled for a reason. Eph. 1:3-14; then note esp. 1:20-23.

Ekklesia, classical Greek, ekklesia of jurist in Athens. Not quit being what they were, but assembled for a purpose. Church is called out, but remains in. In the world, but not of the world. We are not called into isolation.

The kingdom of God is the rule and reign of God. Part of our problem with using the word kingdom is that it has two uses: concrete, abstract. So in English it is ambiguous. The kingdom of God exists everywhere in this world. There is no place outside the kingdom of God, for the kingdom is that which God controls. But for humanity, the height of his creation, humans with free moral agency, the kingdom extends only where there are willing subjects.

Kingdom of heaven = kingdom of God, =kingship or sovereignty of God.

What if people are under the rule of God but do not know it. That will one day become apparent. Here is what will happen. That has not happened, but one day that will happen. Phil. 2:5-11.

God wants willing subjects.

There is another reason for this distinction. The kingdom of the Gospels is a restored kingdom; it is the logical extension of the OT kingdom. So Jesus uses the concept and word, kingdom. But the kingdom restored finds its reality in the church established. No person can be a willing kingdom person without submitting to the will of the king. A person can be willing (even think they are submitted) but not in the kingdom.

We have developed an inadequate focus. All has to do with this question, what is our purpose? Do we have a church (institutional) purpose or a kingdom purpose?

Now those of you who have been following along know that this is a follow-up.

Could easily summarize: our purpose is to love God and love others.

That would be inadequate in most of our minds, wouldn't it? We want more.

Can it really be that simple?

We must think in terms of kingdom principles that have the power to transform our lives. These will guide us, help us.

Church is the community, kingdom does not demand such.

Church is the gathered people, fellowshiping and supporting.

Church is God's experiment and experience in what people can be when they willingly follow.

Difference between OT and NT is dynamic: not born into relationship with God in NT, willing subjects.

Purpose is to declare the Excellencies of God's power, people, presence.

Eph. 1:15-23

The church is the presence of God on earth, demonstrating what a people look like who commit themselves to living under the Lordship of Jesus (which is the kingship of the King) but so much more.