

## True to Our Purpose

By Bob Young

### Introduction

There are two options in hospitality: (1) lots of great dishes, (2) one especially good dish, a personal specialty. I like the latter, but it is hard in preaching to focus on one thought. I want to say one thing in this sermon: God has a purpose for this church. Woe to us if we fail in that purpose!

Acts 20 = interesting, Paul's last time with elders from Ephesus. He has a special relationship with this special church. Timothy ministers in Ephesus. So later he had the opportunity to write more. His topic—the gospel of God's grace, the word of his grace. Notice the verbs in vv. 17-24: serving, preaching, teaching, declaring, testifying/witnessing.

### >>>Bible speaks much of God's purpose.

In Matthew, Jesus came. He came with a purpose. That purpose is noted in his names: Jesus, Emmanuel, Christ-Messiah. The gospel of Matthew is beautifully constructed. Notice the how the conclusion of book is a continuation of the Emmanuel commitment: Matt 28:18-20.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has a purpose, Luke 19:10. In Luke's continuing history of the early church, Paul has a purpose, Acts 26:16.

The church is united in purpose: 1 Cor. 1:8-10; Phil. 2:2; Eph. 1:9-11; 2:15; 3:6-11.

Guder: *The Conversion of the Church*. "I wonder if we are in a position where we need just that, but do not even know it. How closely do we live out the purpose of Jesus? Being the body of Christ is not a desirable option. It is a mandate. We are not here to serve ourselves."

### >>>We are to be united in purpose

Family vacation in Michigan UP, rain, all together in pop-up camper.... "When we are fighting, we aren't doing what we are here to do."

Philip Yancey, "Soul Survivor: How my faith survived the church." "I have spent most of my life in recovery from the church."

>>>Luke gives us insights into God's purpose—the transition from Jesus' ministry to the continuing ministry of the church. Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:8; Witnesses.

We cannot be firsthand witnesses of Jesus, but there are in courts of law expert witnesses. Would you be called as an expert witness? Witness = martyr. What is your witness? Can I get a witness?

We cannot be an effective witness of what we have not seen, what we have not experienced. And our testimony is always biased. If we are to be faithful witnesses, we must be both objective and subjective. We must be involved, but we must try to see without our own bias and prejudice.

>>>We must make certain that we do not see God's purpose solely through the lens of our own needs and views. Brian McLaren has observed our tendency to understand God in our own terms:

*For the conservatives, God is conservative; for the liberals, God is liberal; for the intellectuals God is clothed in abstractions and complexities; while for the uneducated, God is a down-to-earth and simple kind of guy. For the military man, God tends to be about power; while for the bureaucrat God is about policies. For the artist God has a wildness and beauty that inspires and attracts; while for the engineer, God's grandeur is in predictability, stability and definition—opposite qualities of those loved by the artist. For the social worker, God sides with the poor and oppressed; while for the entrepreneur, God rewards the diligent and clever.*

We should not be surprised that in the U.S. church we are seeking to increase our territory and bless us with more material wealth.

Nor are we surprised when we see competing models of church being lived out:

(1) Attractional vs. missional; (2) Institutional vs. relational

Evangelism has been historically a cognitive process, the acceptance of certain truths or propositions by an individual. More recently, we are asking about transformed lives and genuine discipleship, learners who follow Jesus. Jesus did not say, do you accept me as your personal Savior? He said, "Follow me."

How could a follower of Jesus, a disciple of Jesus, have any other mission than the mission of Jesus? If he is our Lord, if he is our Master, does it not follow that his task is our task? What matters to him matters to us? Jesus defined his own mission in the world by reading an OT text in a Nazareth synagogue. He did not take up the prophecies of Isa. 7,9,53. He took up the words of Isa. 61. (Luke 4:14-21)

He shows us the meaning of life under the kingdom rule of God. Jesus alone can save. Those who are genuinely his disciples imitate his concern for the poor, persons in prison, the blind, and the burdened. We follow his example of righteousness, compassion, and love.

Those who hear good news and want to become kingdom citizens in the reign of God need teaching. The church, God's holy nation, has a culture, an accepted way of doing things. We in the church are being transformed into that image, we are growing and learning the culture, which is counter-cultural. We are not where we were yesterday or last year, and we are not where we will be next year. Because we expect this kind of continuing growth from every kingdom person, we should not expect new people to know automatically the things of the kingdom. Christianity is more than being a civil or good person. Christianity is loyalty to a new ruler. We must acquire the new habits of the new culture in the new community. We must learn the new language, the new jargon. The old way of talking is fading. We are becoming "naturalized" citizens.

The Sermon on the Mount contains a summary of Jesus' teaching for the reign of God, new practices that differ from the accepted wisdom. You have heard...but I say. This is a manifesto for life under God's rule, seeking the kingdom. The Beatitudes illustrate the point. The beatitudes are not mere platitudes. They speak of the blessing of behavior that differs significantly from the dominant culture.

**The dominant culture says**, how fortunate you are if you have your life under control and do not need anyone else. **Jesus says**, blessed are the poor in spirit, for those with the spirit of the poor know that life is not under control, we need other people in order to make it. And these are the people who know also they need God. The poor in spirit know what it is to depend on God. The rich are tempted to think they can do it on their own, without God's help. The poor in spirit belong to the kingdom of God.

**The dominant culture says**, you will be happy if you avoid any situation that exposes you to the suffering of others or that causes you yourself to suffer or mourn or sacrifice." Happy-face stickers and "have a nice day." **Jesus blessed** those who mourn. God comforts those who sorry over the state of the world, injustices, oppression, inequality, poverty, their own sin, the sin of others, those situation where evil seems to have the upper hand. Those who mourn for the loss of life among unsaved people in Iraq, those who grieve over oppression, who do not turn away from seeing it, who are willing to get dirty to help, and who find comfort because God is going to do something about it, either with or without us.

**The dominant culture says**, You will be happy if you can get back at those who are hurting you. **Jesus blessed** the meek. Gentle, non-coercive. This is not wilting before others, but it believes revenge belongs to God. This is not a call to be passive, but to be non-violent, gentle, and to trust God to deliver. Jesus was saying the earth belongs ultimately to those who can reflect God's spirit without coercing others into doing things their way.

**The dominant culture says** hungering and thirsting is good—as long as it focuses on material things. **Jesus says** the only proper goal of hungering and thirsting is righteousness. One’s relationship with God is righteous when one is living up to the covenant with God. Seeking to live in right relationship with God and others is to know the blessing of God. To live as part of God’s people is to desire righteousness and justice above all else.

**The dominant culture says** good relationships depend on performance. I will love you if... **Jesus praises** the merciful who give to others better than they deserve. Giving to others when they cannot pay back. Loving enemies who are not likely to love you back.

**The dominant culture** seldom uses the word “pure”. Personal purity is impossible, and is not desirable. **Jesus blesses** the pure. This is not the ritual cleanness of Jewish law. This is the cleanness that comes from forgiveness, becoming clean through seeking justice, encouraging the oppressed, defending others. To be pure is to act justly, forgive, not carry resentments, be in right relationships with others, and thus with God. Pure in heart is single-mindedness—nothing matters more in this world than the kingdom of God.

**The dominant culture says** you will be happiest if you stay out of conflicts and let other people “fight it out”. **Jesus said**, Blessed are the peacemakers, for they are the children of God. Peace is more than the absence of war. It is wholeness, health, economic prosperity, right relationships, justice. It is the gift of God in the day of salvation. Peacemakers are actively working to make sure shalom comes. These practice justice and help restore right relationships, even in the midst of controversy, proactively practicing the way of the cross.

**The dominant culture** says you will be happy if everyone likes you all the time. **Jesus blesses** those who are persecuted, for the sake of righteousness and justice, false accused, receiving the bad words of others.

This kingdom way of life is obviously not for the timid. It requires teaching and learning. We must become such ourselves before we can call others with our testimony. This is commitment and practice in the Christian community. Such teaching is not only for those who are entering the church/kingdom, it is for the continuing formation of Jesus’ disciples whose goal is to look more and more like him.

When disciples become captive in the dominant culture into which Christ has sent us, when we become more fluent in the culture than in the counter-culture, our mission becomes unintelligible, first to us, then to others. The disciple or ambassador who has gone native has lost the clarity of the original mission.

## **Conclusion**

Think again about Rom. 6:1-6, Paul’s description of the transformation that comes when one decides to follow Jesus.

Michael Jenkins: We are soaked to the skin in the death of Christ. Our union with Christ drips from us. We never “get over” this immersion; this drowning in Christ’s death marks us daily; we trail wet footprints of this drenching wherever we go; we never dry off.

Surely we have failed. I will do better. Kingdom people are saying, I will do better. Those seeking the rule and reign of God are saying, Count me in. Help me learn this blessed way. Make my purpose his purpose. Immerse me in his death that I may be clean, pray that I will never dry off.