

What Is the Work of the Church?

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Introduction

Several years ago, a family visited the Lord's day morning assembly where I preached. In conversation with them afterward they asked some questions: "What sort of program do you have for teenagers? Do you take them on skiing trips and have other such activities for them?" It was their first—and last—visit. They did not like my answer—that our "program" for teenagers was their involvement in Bible study and worship and the various good works of the local church in which we encouraged members of every age to participate.

The attitude evinced by the folk quoted above has become increasingly prevalent over the years. Should a questionnaire be distributed to members of the church forty years old and younger, asking them to frame a brief sentence describing the work of the church of Christ, I fear what the results would be. Just what is the work of the church that Jesus built (Mat. 16:18)?

The Nature of the Church

The nature of any institution determines its work. If we would comprehend the God-given work of the church, we must comprehend its nature. As with millions today, Pontius Pilate did not "get it" when the Lord described the nature of the kingdom over which He would reign:

My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence (John 18:36).

When we read His statement, we come away with only one word that aptly describes the nature of the kingdom of Christ—*spiritual*. Note that it is not a political entity with a standing army, such as the Legions of Rome, served by Pilate. Had His kingdom been of that species, His army would have prevented His being arrested in the first place.

No, His kingdom originated in another world, and it was not conceived or established by men. This kingdom, the church Jesus built, originated in the mind of the Triune Godhead in eternity (Eph. 3:9–11). It ultimately relates to another world more than to this. The church is a spiritual institution.

Paul also gives us some insight into the church's nature: "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). He

stated that the kingdom does not revolve around the physical desires, or even needs, of men. Rather, the church has to do with spiritual verities. It is a spiritual entity in its nature.

Men have corrupted religion so as to make their counterfeit versions of the church everything **except** that spiritual institution that the Christ established. It is not a political, commercial, philosophical, or merely social institution. Although faithful membership in the Lord's church contributes greatly to one's physical and emotional health, its nature relates only secondarily to these benefits. It is rather a spiritual body that relates to and provides for man's spiritual makeup and needs.

The Work of the Church Exemplified

Why did the Word become flesh and dwell among us? The Lord and His inspired spokesmen are clear: "For the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10; cf. John 10:10; 12:47; 1 Tim. 1:15; et al.). He ever had His eye on the cross and its horror. He willingly submitted to it, knowing it was necessary for Him to accomplish the work that brought Him to earth. Thus His final mortal words were, "It is finished" (John 19:30). The execution of the Divine plan of human redemption—the work He came to do—was now done.

The church is the spiritual body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23; et al.). The work that Jesus did in His physical body signals the work in which His spiritual body should be engaged. Thus the work of both is one: "to seek and to save that which was lost." While I would expect few members of the Lord's body to contradict verbally the foregoing conclusion, many strongly contradict it practically.

The Work of the Church Implied

Besides the foregoing implication of the work of the Lord's spiritual body, the great commission implies the same conclusion. Jesus did not instruct the apostles (and us through them) to go everywhere and to all men, promising freedom from want, illness, and injury if they would only become Jesus' disciples. No, He rather told them to preach the saving Gospel so men could believe it, be baptized, and be saved from the guilt of past sins—not from "social problems," à la the "social gospel" (Mark 16:15-16; Rom. 1:16-17). While the work of preaching the Gospel requires physical labor and the expenditure of material resources, it is nonetheless a thoroughly spiritual work, aimed squarely at the spiritual nature and needs of human beings, met only in Christ (John 14:6). Therefore, the great commission implies that the work of the church, like its nature, is spiritual. Further, the great commission explicitly states what that spiritual work of the church is—to "make disciples of all the nations" (Mat. 28:18, ASV).

“Benevolence” and “Edification”

Brethren generally identify the “work of the church” as evangelism, benevolence, and edification. There is merit to this answer, for the apostolic church was commanded to (and did) engage in all three of these activities. However, our list may tend to imply that these three areas of work deserve equal emphasis, which conclusion is not supported by the Scriptures.

Some are quick to point to the numerous “benevolent” acts of our Lord as an example for His spiritual body. Undeniably, His compassion caused Him to heal all sorts of diseases, deformities, and handicaps and to feed thousands of famished listeners. Although in no way wishing to minimize the motivation of His compassion, there was a deeper and nobler purpose behind all of Jesus’ signs and wonders than relieving temporary discomforts or needs. We do not have to merely suppose what it was:

Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name (John 20:30–31).

The Lord’s fundamental purpose—even in relieving physical suffering—obviously went beyond that immediate need. Verily, he came to relieve men of the worst “disease” of all—sin, which causes not only temporary suffering, but, if not “healed,” eternal ruin and torment. The real aim of Jesus’ mighty works was to prove that He was the Christ and that He could redeem men from their sins.

God did all manner of mighty works and blessed mankind in many ways through various men and/or angels before His Son came into this world. The Pre-incarnate Word could have continued such wonders without ever leaving Heaven. However, the ultimate blessing of all families of the earth, promised to Abraham through his seed (Gal. 3:16), could not be accomplished by either mere mortal or angel. This one thing—man’s redemption—is what required Deity to become flesh. Clearly, the acts of physical “benevolence” the Lord performed were secondary to and supportive of His primary work—saving mankind from sin.

In these relative emphases of our Lord there is surely instruction for us. Preaching the Gospel and seeking the lost is the primary and fundamental work of the church. Should the church help the helpless with their physical needs as we have opportunity and ability? Indeed we should (Gal. 6:10; Jam. 1:27; et al.). However, we should never lose sight of the more important spiritual help we can provide through the Gospel for their souls. Similarly, the church’s work of building itself up in love—edification (Eph. 4:16)—is not merely to effect

numerical growth or even to increase Scriptural knowledge or spiritual maturity as ends **within themselves**. Rather, the great **practical** aim of building up a church to become strong ought to be an ever-increasing ability to preach the saving Gospel to more people.

Abandoning the Real Work

If some had their way, with their *ministering-to-the-whole-man* and *meeting-felt-needs* philosophies in religion, they would make supplying the physical and social needs of men the principal – if not the **only** – work of the church. Still worse, some want to make entertainment and recreation the work of the Lord's body. My first work out of college in 1959 was to serve as one of the preachers with a large congregation. A nearby Methodist Church building had a gymnasium in its basement. One could have tortured the elders where I worked and they would not have built such a building, correctly understanding there was no way to justify such use of the Lord's money. Twenty years later, that same congregation built its own gymnasium. Oh, they call it their "family life center." However, when I see a building with a very high ceiling, basketball goals, net poles for volleyball, and a floor marked with boundary lines for various sports, pardon me for calling it a "gymnasium."

When a congregation starts down this road, it is typically a "slippery slope." A widespread symptom of this problem is the seemingly endless series of church sponsored pleasure jaunts for senior citizens and teenagers. I am as much in favor of having a good time and seeing pretty scenery in the company of good people as the next fellow. I commend Christians who plan and pay for (from their own pockets) such outings. However, why should the Lord's church pay the salary of someone who spends much of his time planning such pleasure jaunts, taken on a bus or van that is owned, operated, and fueled by the church? It takes little imagination to see what such perverted emphasis is teaching young people about the work of the church.

Can anyone imagine the apostle Peter's deputizing some brother in Jerusalem to plan a three-day sight-seeing trip to Tyre and Sidon for the "39ers" or the "Autumn Leaves" group in church-owned chariots? Try picturing Timothy's planning a weekend ski retreat on Mt. Olympus for the "keen teens" of Ephesus. Did Paul ever consider taking a contribution from the Gentile-area churches to build a "family life center" for the poor in Judea? Such suggestions are ludicrous at best – blasphemous at worst. They no more represent the work of the blood-bought church of Christ in this century than they did in the first.

Who Will Do It?

If the church is sidetracked to some lesser work than preaching the Gospel it will not be done. No other institution is charged with this work, and none other is willing or able to do it. Those who govern us will not. At least some of these are increasingly seeking to curtail our doing it. Those in public and state education will not do it. Many teachers and most professors are agnostics at best and atheists at worst. Even those who believe in God in the schools and universities are effectively silenced by their superiors and/or by official policy and “political correctness” by their peers. The primary aim of many university professors seems to be the destruction of faith in their students. Big business will not preach the Gospel. All it cares about it is making a profit. The so-called “believing world” of denominationalism is unable to do so. It does not know what the Gospel is; that is why denominationalism exists.

Conclusion

If the church abandons the work of preaching the Gospel to the world, there may as well be no Gospel. The world will be no less lost in either case, because it will be without the only power to save (Rom. 1:16). It is one thing to realize what the work of the church is, but we must act upon this reality. Elders must keep this aim central in leading congregations. Preachers must not lose sight of this imperative in their preaching and all their work. As individuals who make up the local churches, we must also daily engage ourselves in this greatest and most enduring work according to our respective levels of ability and opportunity.

[Note: I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the June 2002 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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