

WHAT ON EARTH IS THE PURPOSE?

“In but not of the world ...”

All through the years of study and preaching and calling on people – in the midst of celebrations and defeats, and the many people who have loved me and whom I have come to love – there has been a wonderment in the background. I wish I could put it better, but that will have to do for the moment. And this does not come as any kind of complaint. I have been happier as a pastor than most of the pastors I know. A lot of the life of the church doesn't show on the outside. A good deal of the time, it is rich and deep on the inside.

But from time to time, through all the years, I have felt that something vital was “hidden” just beneath the surface. We have vestiges of themes, principles, teachings, and awareness which are so very close to who we are and what we are about, but which are somehow no longer quite in focus. We get glimpses of an extraordinary caring, generosity, discipline, commitment, affection – but then it shimmers again, almost like a mirage. And then we don't see it again for weeks, or even months. Why does the lighting have to be just right?

There is a tendency among some of us to idealize the early church. We want it to be “perfect” because it was started by the immediate followers of Jesus. I am not among those who feel this way. I know about the problems between James (the Lord's brother) and Paul. In many ways, their relationship represents the hottest battles of the first century of Christianity. James was trying to keep acceptable in the heartland of Judaism, and Paul was trying to spread the faith to Gentiles. Success for one was failure for the other. I may grieve, but I do not try to minimize the fact that there was a battle going on. I *truly* grieve over the break between Paul and Barnabas. So early in the game, and two of our most outstanding brothers could not keep their friendship in Christ? Real life is painful and doesn't always work like we think it should. Who knows what this did to John Mark, who had once accompanied them both. It seems that he ended up “the scribe” for Peter instead of for Paul. And later on, John Mark and Paul seem to have toned down the split between them, but what were the real repercussions? We will never know.

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All through the story of Paul we can feel the factions, the animosities, the arguments. We know Paul was “The Great Apostle,” but nobody knew that in his time, including Paul. So all his life he fought for his status and credentials, trying to be heard, trying to stay faithful to his mission. Nobody can read the Corinthian letters (or Revelation 2 and 3) and think that the early church was all sweetness and light.

Tradition often tries to skip over such realities and leave us with the impression that while there have been a few malcontents on the fringes, the church has essentially been a smooth and unified movement sweeping gently and consistently through the world from the Ascension onward. Pope has succeeded pope, from Peter to the present day, and the main body of the church has always known the truth and the light of Christ, as time marches on. Really? How many great popes have there been? Five? What about the split between the Eastern Church and the Western Church? What do we do with the years when there was a pope in Rome and another in Constantinople? How many of our best sons and daughters did we burn because they bothered us by being too faithful? (Some we burned for being far from faithful, but that seems hardly an excuse for taking the fires of Hell into our own hands.)

I’m just telling you that I do not idealize the church, early or any other time. Nor do I picture it with only its worst flaws, as so many in our time love to do. Certainly there are other sources and motives, but in western culture any fair person would have to admit that the major impetus – as well as the blood, sweat, and tears – behind our efforts to build free and humane governments, systems for a wider distribution of goods, institutions of learning, hospitals, corps of nurses ... much of it has essentially come from the church. Concepts of home and monogamy and responsible parents raising children – all under serious strain and fire in our day – were once essentially inspired by the church. And all of these were merely side effects. To worship, obey, and love God was the purpose. To invite those who did not know God “back” into relationship with God was also the purpose.

But focusing on all of the side effects has always seemed too tame. It is worth a lot, and worth approximately the level of commitment that is found in the vast majority of churches across the land. It’s nice, it’s good, it’s commendable – we should support it, kick in a few bucks, give a little time to keep it all going. If enough of us do that, the church will go on doing a lot of good and helping a lot of people – at least

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marrying and burying them, and being a place where people can gather when they wish (to hear pep talks on being nicer to each other) and think about living better lives.

Something is missing from this picture! “What is that? I can’t make that out ...” (If this quote puzzles you, you might want to rent a movie called “Run Silent, Run Deep” starring Burt Lancaster and that guy who was in “Gone With the Wind.”) There are endless hints, but nobody comes right out and tells us what was really making the early church so dynamic. Maybe Luke would have if he had finished the Book of Acts, which doesn’t end; it just stops. (I suspect that both Paul and Luke died in Nero’s persecution (64 or 65 A.D.) and we never heard from either one of them again.) In any case, the courage and devotion that Paul brought to his work were astounding. But the truth is, the church was spreading faster than Paul could travel. By the end of his third journey, Paul could hardly find a village or town anywhere on the eastern end of the Mediterranean world that did not have a “church” – a house church – a Disciple Band of Christians gathering to live the “New Life” together.

There were no buildings yet – that is, none built to be a “church.” There were a few known leaders: Peter, James, Paul, Apollos, Barnabas, Mark. The list is much longer if we add their friends, like Tychicus, Silas, Timothy, Philemon, Lydia, Priscilla, etc. But there were no bishops or church organizations as we think of them. There were no Sunday Schools, church curriculums, youth groups, or choirs. Nobody had a New Testament, and almost nobody had an Old Testament. Maybe a scroll of some Old Testament book here and there.

Doesn’t that make us wonder what was really happening?

I go to pastor a church for ten or fifteen years. I spend all my hours and energy, full time, on that one congregation. At the end of my ministry there, the congregation is stronger, more aware, more committed to Jesus than when I came. And they love each other more. No complaints. I don’t play the games that build numbers. So when I leave, the church is not much bigger in numbers than when I came. And the vast majority of the members of that congregation do approximately nothing to bring new people into the church. They are busy with their own lives and problems. Why should they care if more people come to church? They can hardly

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keep up with those who are already there. Those who trickle-in replace those who leave, so all is well.

Paul visits Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe – stays maybe a few weeks. He gets beat up, whipped, stoned, driven out of town. But he comes back two years later and they are still there! Hello? He goes to Corinth or Ephesus and stays a little longer, and the clear evidence is that a couple of years after that, the entire area is honeycombed with house churches. Disciple Bands are everywhere, and no structure is maintaining them; no official “leader” is guiding, inspiring, or spending their full time nurturing them. And, I repeat, they don’t even have a New Testament. All they have is each other, and a Message that somebody brought them on the way through town. A Message about some guy who died because He wanted them to know how much God loved them. Only, He came back from death to be with them, if they wanted Him to be, and He is inviting them into a New WAY of Life.

What is going on?! There is a dynamism, an excitement, a joy, a bond between the people in this picture that we are not factoring in. What could account for this?

“You get to die and go to Heaven.” You think that would be enough to do all this? That is part of my Faith too, but it doesn’t change the present reality very much. All my life, I have seen people yawn and stay the same with that message. And with these messages too: He is coming soon. We can make life better for each other. He rose from the dead. He calls us into His Church. We love each other because He first loved us. We are offered forgiveness, mercy, grace, new beginnings. He died for us. Freedom from Satan, the Law, and the bondage of this present world.

All of these are incredible messages. All of them are basic parts of our larger Message: LIFE with God. But we must not be putting it all together in the same way they were, because for them it wasn’t just a pleasantry, a meal ticket, or a way to help others. (By the way, I didn’t mention the part about not going to Hell. That was a later invention. Paul’s perspective is that we are already in Hell – in bondage. Jesus came to free us from a very present bondage to Satan and this world, not to keep us out of some later punishment.)

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So all the pieces are still there, but we don't seem to have them put together right. Each piece is so big and important that we can "run off of them" still. But we are looking at a dynamism that went from *twelve disciples* to a movement that overwhelmed the Roman Empire in three hundred years. Only, it wasn't a mega-church or a successful denominational program. It was a grassroots dynamism that was growing everywhere it touched down, regardless of persecution, economic problems, leadership, arguments, jealousies, betrayals, bad parents, wrong pronouns, sexual orientations, health problems, loss of loved ones. I cannot believe it. It doesn't seem possible. Every time I think about it for very long, I start to weep. And I don't even know if they are tears of sorrow or tears of joy. But it makes me wish I could have been part of it – I mean, in ways clearer than it seems to be in most places today.

The one thing I cannot get past – the common denominator, the missing piece – is that they were part of house churches: Disciple Bands. And I suspect that three things were strong and clear for them that are muted or garbled for us.

First, Jesus was alive and with them. The Holy Spirit was the resurrected and living *presence* of Jesus. Nothing was merely in the past or future tense. When they heard about Jesus being resurrected from the dead, they "checked it out" – went apart and got quiet and still within – and found out it was no theory, no idle tale. There He was! All the things they had heard about forgiveness, guidance, grace, and love were true. Not perfect all the time, but real. After all, there is a lot of "interference" in our minds – a lot of "noise" in our inner lives. But there He was! Once introduced, so to speak, they knew it to be true. And between life with Him and life without Him – well, no comparison. That was the heart and core of it. Liturgy, the Bible, sacrament, and all the rest came later – enhanced it perhaps, and reminded them – but His presence was the heart and core of it.

The second thing was "each other." Only not, I suspect, as we normally think of it. We always go grandiose, given the chance. We want it to be big – meaning, impressive. If we aren't sure something is true, we want hundreds or thousands to say they believe it, so we can be reassured. How many did it take for Paul to believe he had met Jesus on that Damascus Road? The most unlikely person, with the worst possible attitude, in the most unlikely way, with the most unlikely results. (Acts 9:1-19) And how long was Paul alone afterward? Almost

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immediately the Spirit started sending friends. That was highly unlikely too, from any human perspective. Where did Ananias come from? Or Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Luke, and all the rest? Have you ever thought about how long the list of Paul's friends is? It is not something Paul could have done, engineered, or come up with on his own. Especially not from where he started – as one of the worst enemies of the New WAY. It is one of the most predictable promises of our Path, yet few seem to know or trust it: If we really are converted, the very next thing the Spirit does is send us friends for the WAY. Even at my low level of faith, it has always been true, my whole life. Over and over I have gone into difficult, even seemingly impossible situations (churches), and then they start to show up: friends, who begin to make it all possible.

And the third thing? From time to time it has been severely muted in our history, but always it comes back again. *“Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man – but Christ is all, and in all.”* (Colossians 3:9-11) It is one of the great “excitements” of the early church, one of Paul's most consistent themes: *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* (Galatians 3:28) *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace; and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.”* (Ephesians 2:13-18)

The early Christians were excited (and dumfounded) by the realization that old animosities were being eradicated. Jesus was bigger than all their former prejudices and hatreds. Peter's “third conversion” was the realization that Gentiles were receiving the Holy Spirit too: *“If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?”* (Acts 11:17)

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The church was NEW *because* it cut across all the borders and barriers of this world. Love is an interesting concept to contemplate, but clearly the experience of love transforms us. In our day, the walls of race, sexual orientation, economic position, political preference, and national pride keep trying to divide us. The Holy Spirit of our Lord keeps uniting us. And it is a thrilling thing when this happens. But we need to stay clear and fair. Our prejudices do not come out of nowhere. There are worldly reasons and experiences that create the walls. It's just that the Holy Spirit melts those barriers when people on both sides of the wall receive the Spirit. The new unity and fellowship is wondrous, and genuine.

It gets complicated, however, when the church tries to heal these "differences" by logic or by appeal to humanitarian "good will," and not by the presence of the Holy Spirit of Jesus. Frequently, this is the stance of "liberal churches." Wherever this is the approach, we only feel the increase of guilt, anger, animosity, and growing disunity. Instead of the barriers and dividing walls coming down, the "Christians" only get angrier at each other and toward all those who don't cooperate with the "good cause" as humans have designed it. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, the barriers melt away. People find love, gratitude, and appreciation for each other. In grace, the old barriers just look foolish and unnecessary. And other people on the other side of those former barriers seem valuable and important again. Relationship is no strain; the barriers were the strain. In human do-gooding, the walls of prejudice look like huge adversaries that we have to "fight" with might and mien. But the battles themselves create more hatred than love.

The third great surprise and delight of the early church was the experience of a love (community) that encompassed brothers and sisters who had been "outside" before. It was thrilling. And it was not a one-way street, as is so often true in the reconciliations we pretend today. Nor was it just an occasional gathering of people from different walks of life – a brief demonstration or a short-lived conference or celebration to prove a point. The early Christians "lived together" in their new communities of faith. They didn't want to be apart anymore. It was not just for show; it was for real. They didn't try to make it happen – it happened *to them*.

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So I have the deep conviction that the Christian Life is intended for a small Disciple Band. This is the only configuration I can imagine that explains the dynamism of the early church. Nobody was trying to “save the world.” Nobody was trying to “love everybody.” They were trying to be faithful in and from small Disciple Bands, where people really knew and cared about each other – because they really knew and cared about Jesus. They had encountered Him, and so He called them into the small but very real “faith families” where they could live the New Life together. And so it spread from there. That is, Disciple Bands begat new Disciple Bands, but nobody expected to be strong “out there” in some vast organization or generic cause. “Blood is thicker than water.” But Spirit is thicker than blood. Some people are in really good biological families. Many others are not. But every Christian needs to be in an authentic faith family. Very few Christians are, in our time. But my suspicion and conviction is that for the first three generations of Christianity, “church” meant Disciple Band.

One more piece is missing. We mentioned it in passing. It is often mentioned, though not often taken very seriously: We have the story of The Fall. Sin is really about alienation. Our world is at odds with God, to put it mildly. Paul thought that all of us were “in bondage” to sin and Satan in this world. He did not think there was any help in this world – that is, from this world – for any of the real issues of life. Jesus came to save us from this bondage – to invite us into a New Life, a new realm, a new Kingdom. But it requires turning away from this world, the old life, all other “kings.” We cannot save ourselves, but if we come to trust the rightful King, we can turn to Him and follow and obey Him. And He invites us into a very new kind of LIFE, with very different principles and purposes.

Sound familiar? I suspect that the Disciple Bands – the house churches of the early years – really believed this. That is, they really didn’t have any hope left in this world. Oh, it could be okay at times, for a while. But they had turned to a new King, and a new Kingdom. It didn’t matter what happened to them here. They cared, of course, but it didn’t matter to their hopes or genuine expectations. Their Disciple Bands were “islands” of genuine caring and hope and joy amid a sea of bondage, falseness, cruelty, betrayal, despair. They were of course surrounded by many others who were adrift or drowning in the same sea. They genuinely longed to rescue them – that is, to tell the others

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that they too could be part of an “other worldly” island, a small band who lived “in but not of the world.” But they knew, as so many today do not, that they could not save any of these people themselves. They could only tell them who could. They could tell them of “The One Who Lives,” and assure them that if they trusted Him, He would form them into a Disciple Band of their own. And soon the world would be honey-combed with islands of light and love, where any who wanted rescuing could find “safe haven” to live in and work out of, no matter what the world was doing all around them.

That is not the last of the hope and light. Not at all. But it is the hope and the light for now. Nobody “doing well in the world” will be very interested. Not right now. But there are those who are adrift or drowning, and they know it. Some of them would be very interested. Especially if they realized that it wasn’t just about them drowning forever, but about them finding refuge and a New WAY of Life that would in turn allow them to help others find refuge and a New WAY of Life. It is the exact opposite of the way many churches try to help people today. But then, many churches don’t believe that Jesus can really help people very much. Or perhaps they don’t think that many people are still in bondage.

Is *that* our problem? That we think life is so good we don’t need a Savior? Life really can be good. Many wonderful things are going on. Many wonderful people are everywhere around us, and lots of them are not Christians. There is beauty everywhere. The Creator did a spectacular job. And yet this “surface of life” is not very thick. The marks of our alienation are not hard to find, no matter how good things seem to be for any one of us at the moment. Pain and loneliness and depression are everywhere. Guilt, fear, shame, and anger have not gone into serious decline, not even in our “very best” neighborhoods. The Seven Deadly Sins still stalk the earth, and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse still ride. If you don’t think we need a Savior, you are in a greater pattern of denial than any alcoholic who ever drank. From my perspective, every single one of us needs to be in a small, genuine, intentional faith family, or we will soon be at the mercy of all the death and despair of this world. We can only be children of light – part of the new Kingdom – if we have the true King transforming and guiding us ... and other faithful followers to share the WAY with. And we *will not* change this world. We can only find a WAY to live in, but not of, this world – until a new day dawns, and we find ourselves in another realm.