

### Inward, Upward, or Outward?

Scripture: Genesis 12:3; 1 Chronicles 16:23–24; Psalm 18:49; Isaiah 49:6; Isaiah 42:10–12; Isaiah 66:19; Jonah 3:1–10; John 13:35; John 20:21; Ephesians 4: 11–13; Revelation 4:10–11; Revelation 5:8–14

Code: A187

If the average evangelical congregation were surveyed concerning the primary purpose of the church, it is likely that many diverse answers would be given.

Several purposes, however, would probably be prominent.

A large number would rank *fellowship* first, the opportunity to associate and interact with fellow Christians who share similar beliefs and values. They highly value the fact that the church provides activities and programs for the whole family and is a place where relationships are nurtured and shared and where inspiration is provided through good preaching and beautiful music. A favorite verse for such church members is likely to be, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

At a level perhaps a step higher, some Christians would consider *sound biblical teaching* to be the church’s principal function, expounding Scripture and strengthening believers in the knowledge of and obedience to God’s revealed truth. That emphasis would include helping believers discover and minister their spiritual gifts in various forms of leadership and service. Like fellowship, that too is a basic function of the church, because God “gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Adding a more elevated level, some members would consider *praise of God* to be the supreme purpose of the church. They emphasize the church as a praising community that exalts the Lord in adoration, image, and reverence. Praise is clearly a central purpose of God’s people just it has always been and will always be a central activity of heaven, where both saints and angels will eternally sing praises to God. “Worthy, Thou, our Lord and our God,” sing the twenty-four elders lying prostrate before God’s throne, “to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed, and are created” (Revelation 4:10-11; cf. 5:8-14).

All of those emphases are thoroughly biblical and should characterize every body of believers. But neither separately nor together do they represent the central purpose and mission of the church in the world. The supreme purpose and motive of every individual believer and every body of believers is to glorify God, and the supreme way in which God chose to glorify Himself was through the redemption of sinful men. *It is through participation in that redemptive plan that believers themselves most glorify God.*

Nothing so much glorifies God as His gracious redemption of damned, hell-bound sinners. It was for

that ultimate purpose that God called Abraham, that in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). It was never the Lord’s intention to isolate Israel as His sole focus of concern but rather to use that specially chosen and blessed nation to reach all other nations of the world for Himself. Israel was called to “proclaim good tidings of His salvation from day to day” and to “tell of His glory among the nations, His wonderful deeds among all the peoples” (1 Chronicles 16:23-24; cf. Psalm 18:49). Like her Messiah, Israel was to be “a light to the nations so that [the Lord’s] salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6; cf. 42:10-12; 66:19; Jonah 3:1-10).

Likewise, the great mission of the church is to so love, learn, and live as to call men and women to Jesus Christ. As sinners are forgiven and are transformed from death to life and from darkness to light, God is glorified through that gracious miracle. The glory of God is manifest in His loving provision to redeem lost men. He Himself paid the ultimate price to fulfill His glory.

If God’s primary purpose for the saved were loving fellowship, He would take believers immediately to heaven, where spiritual fellowship is perfect, unhindered by sin, disharmony, or loneliness. If His primary purpose for the saved were the learning of His Word, He would also take believers immediately to heaven, where His Word is perfectly known and understood. And if God’s primary purpose for the saved were to give Him praise, He would, again, take believers immediately to heaven, where praise is perfect and unending.

There is only one reason the Lord allows His church to remain on earth: *to seek and to save the lost*, just as Christ’s only reason for coming to earth was to seek and to save the lost. “As the Father has sent Me,” He declared, “I also send you” (John 20:21). Therefore, believers who are not committed to winning the lost for Jesus Christ should reexamine their relationship to the Lord and certainly their divine reason for existence.

Fellowship, teaching, and praise are not the mission of the church but are rather the preparation of the church to fulfill its mission of winning the lost. And just as in athletics, training should never be confused with or substituted for actually competing in the game, which is the reason for all the training.

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