

WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S PURPOSE?

By Davis Huckabee

It is obvious from the most casual observation that the great majority of professed Christians and church members have only the foggiest notion of what the purpose of a New Testament Church is, and many have totally erroneous views of its purpose. Yet the Lord has not left His people and His churches in the world for no reason. But how many church members act as if their lives were their own, and they had no responsibility to anyone but self.

It is said that a guest speaker at a mental institution proposed the question "Why Are We All Here?" To which one of the inmates replied, "Because we are not all there!" We propose to ask this question in regard to New Testament Churches. Why are churches left in the world? What are the purposes of the churches? It is to be feared that there are many churches that have left off to do their duty unto the Lord, and have become, to all practical purposes, dead churches. The reason for this state of affairs may be traced to the members, many of whom are like the man of whom the minister unthinkingly remarked at the beginning of a funeral sermon that "This corpse has been a member of this church for forty years." Too many spiritually dead church members will make for a spiritually dead church as well.

Do we have the right concept of the purposes of a New Testament church? Clearly many church members do not understand what their reason for existence as Christians and as a church is, else they would live and act differently than they do. Yet the Scriptures present no uncertain testimony in this matter, but clearly define the purposes for the churches' existence, and we become guilty before God if we do not fulfill these purposes. Many people, if we may judge by their actions, seem to think that the church is some sort of a social club, or else that it is the instrument of political propaganda, or the instrument for the correcting of social and economic evils. But none of these are the primary purpose for the existence of the Lord's churches, though all of these things may be effected in a greater or lesser degree by the faithful ministry of a church. We propose to ask this question then, and to answer it both negatively and positively in six different considerations, the first of which is—

I. It Is Not For The Egoism of the Carnal.

Many who profess to be devout Christians and think themselves to be the best kind of church members, yet have the idea that the church exists only for the sake of its members. They expect the church to cater to the selfish ego of its members in all things, so that where this attitude obtains in the church, there is generally little ever accomplished by the church beyond the entertaining and comforting of its own carnal members. Such a church will almost always have the fanciest and most comfortable building, the largest organ, and the most elaborate ritual, the most polished messages and the most easy-going discipline of any church in town. But it will also be the most carnal and worldly church, and will do less for the glory of God than almost any other church in town.

A consideration of the church calendar in some newspapers looks like a theater marquee or calendar for the town's social clubs, for there will be movies, plays and skits to entertain, and socials, luncheons and pot-luck suppers to attract those "whose god is their belly" (Phil. 3:19). Other churches think that they must constantly have some kind of contest going on in order to keep the church members interested in coming. But all of these things defeat their own purpose in that they develop a carnal and worldly membership, which must be constantly feed on this same milk-sop diet, and even then they will eventually sicken of it and leave. It is true that a diet of strong meat and hard work will run some

members off from a church. But those carnal ones would never be profitable to the church or to the Lord under any circumstances anyhow, and if they are catered to, they will leaven the rest of the church with their worldliness.

A great deal is made today of “making Christianity relevant to the masses,” “reaching the outsiders,” and “interesting people in the church.” But if this is done at the cost of compromise, it benefits neither the outsiders nor the church. Some years ago, this writer thought about this, and the following poem was the result of that meditation. I trust that the consideration of this may provoke some to more scriptural attitudes in this matter.

Must We Make Christianity Relevant?

You’ve got to make it relevant,”

Was the pig’s great cry.

“You’ve got to come and join me

Down here in my sty.”

So the farmer stepped over

And the pig said with a grin

“Welcome to our lovely company

Come and wade right in.

Now the farmer had a motive grand

For wading in the sty.

He thought he’d improve the pig

By his example by and by.

But time passed by and the pig

Said, “Now I plainly see

That you’re nothing more or less

Than just a pig like me.”

How tragic that so many preachers

Think that they men’s souls can win

By compromising the truth of God

And condoning the world’s sin.

God has never given any person or church the authority to lower the standards to suit the tastes of the world, and anyone does so only at the cost of the Lord’s blessings. Only the Spirit of God can make Christianity relevant to the unbelieving masses. He does so by converting men and making them new creations in Christ, created unto good works and ordained to walk in them, cleansed from the defilements of the flesh and renewed in their minds so as to have new and hallowed ambitions to glorify God.

Much is being made in some circles of the need to appeal to the youth, or to some other special groups, yet where in Scripture is any segment of humanity ever given special emphasis or consideration over another? The truth is that God has always had a consistent method of dealing with all people regardless of their social status or standing, age or aptitude. If anyone is so conceited as to think that he merits special consideration, he is too inflated with his own self-importance to ever be of any use either to the glory of God, or to the up-building of the church.

If a person must be treated like a king and borne about on a silk pillow in order to get him to come to church, then he shows no great evidences of discipleship. “Jesus said unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). If we

would follow Jesus, then we must walk in the path of humility and self-denial, for the kingdom age is not yet come. We must be servants now, if we would rule as kings then.

Man is by nature a proud and egotistical creature, and only grace can change him from this self-centered attitude. Therefore, if there has been no teaching of the need for selflessness in the Christian, or if the Christian has not taken heed to this teaching, he will continue to be vain and egotistical and self-centered, and will want the church to revolve around him and his desires. This can never be, if the church is to fulfill its Divinely given purpose.

This ego-centric attitude often goes far toward defeating the true purposes of the church in that so much of the church's time and finances are spent on keeping the carnal members comfortable and content that there is little left to spend on spreading the truth. Sometimes a church will spend the Lord's money on something that brings no glory to God, but which only satisfies the carnality of its members, and then have the unmitigated gall to denominate this "doing home missions." But mission work, whether home or foreign, must never be disassociated from preaching the Gospel, baptizing the converts and teaching them the Truth of God's Word. Mission work must embody these elements, and where these things are missing, it is not mission work, whatever else it may be.

It has been rightly observed that as a people's spirituality ebbs and wanes, their love of comfort, pomp and ritual increases, and vice versa. The spiritual condition of a church may be judged by what the most emphasis is placed upon in the church. A church does not exist primarily for the benefits its own members, and in actuality, a church is more important than even the aggregate rights of all its present members, for it exists that God might be glorified by the salvation of yet future generations of people. This is why not even a one hundred percent vote to do something is necessarily right. The carnal ego must never be allowed to dictate the purpose and practice of a church. But more positively, we must consider the purposes of the church, that—

II. It Is For The Evangelization Of Sinners.

On this positive note, the Scripture has not left us in any doubt, for one of the commissions that the Lord gave to His churches just before He ascended back to the Father was worded in this way: "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19), literal rendering. To make disciples is nothing less than getting them saved and committed to follow Jesus Christ as Lord. Another form of this commission is given in Mark 16:15, which reveals how this was to be done: "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."

Our Lord has left His churches in the world to be witnesses of Him, and to be soul-saving stations in this life, and any church that fails to recognize this as one of its primal functions, so far fails of its purpose in being left on earth. Not only does such a church fail to fulfill its purpose as far as glorifying God is concerned, but it also fails to perpetuate its own existence, for a scriptural church only lives on as it continues to add converts to its membership. Therefore, let a church cease to evangelize and it immediately begins to stagnate and die. It is only a matter of time before it will cease to exist, unless it repents and does its first works. In this, there is a judicial destruction from the Lord, as is intimated in Revelation 2:4-5: "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent." The first works here, we would judge, were the making of disciples because of a love for the Lord, and when this failed, Jesus called upon this church to repent and return to its original labors else He would cause it to cease from being His church.

It is only by the preaching of the Gospel that souls can be saved, for "after that in the wisdom of God the

world by wisdom knew not God, It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1 Cor. 1:21). Therefore it is not enough that men be merely taught a catechism, or made to repeat a creed, nor be convinced intellectually of the existence of God, for none of these things avail to the saving of the soul. True, these are all elements that enter in more or less in conversion, but they are not the primary factors.

A great deal is made by some of "witnessing" to lost souls, and it is true that Acts 1:8 declares that "ye shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth," (literal rendering). However, an erroneous conclusion has arisen in some people's minds from this, and some have thought that men could be made disciples simply by intellectual arguments, and so some have contented themselves with merely getting people to make a profession of faith in Christ. It is very instructive, however, to consider the history of evangelism subsequent to Acts 1:8, for by far the majority of those who were discipled after this, professed to be saved after the public preaching of the Word. We would not be mistaken in this. All Christians, whether faithful or unfaithful, are witnesses of Jesus Christ. But they may, by their lives, be witnessing a lie, but all are witnessing something. This is all that can be drawn from Acts 1:8. It is a declaration, not a command. They witness of Jesus, whether true or false. However, this is in reference to the Lord's church, and it is the corporate witness of the church that is meant, for the coming of the Comforter was upon the church in order to endue it with power that would make its preaching effectual. Faithful Christians will first of all witness by their lives, and they should vocally witness of the saving grace of God to others as they have opportunity, and as the Spirit leads them. The mistake to be avoided is in substituting personal witnessing for public preaching. In no Scripture does the Lord promise to save people by personal witnessing, although He may do so on occasion, but when this happens, it is generally because the witnessing is of the nature of preaching the Gospel. Often the promise is given that people shall be saved through the preaching of the Gospel to them. "But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach; that if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved... For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:8-9, 13-14). "Therefore whether it were I or they, so we preach, and so ye believed" (1 Cor. 15:11). "In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began; but hath in due times manifested his word through preaching, which is committed unto me according to the commandment of God our Saviour" (Titus 1:2-3). "Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them. And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did" (Acts 8:4-6).

One passage only speaks of "winning souls" (Prov. 11:30), and that is not exactly the most evangelical Book in the Bible, yet modern evangelism has built a whole system of doctrine on this one passage. A veritable pyramid based on a single Scripture. Yet the Hebrew word rendered "winneth" here appears almost a thousand times in the Old Testament, but is never again rendered this way. Of 965 appearances, almost 800 are rendered "take," "take away," or "carry away." "He that takes away souls is wise hardly sounds like a godly work.

Not only so, but the Hebrew word for "wise" is the same that is used in Ezekiel 28:3 of the Antichrist. From the devil's earliest appearance in Scripture he is seen as the great taker away of souls by his subtlety and wicked devices (Gen. 3:1; 2 Cor. 2:11; 11:3). It is to be feared that many professed "soul

winners” more resemble those in Matthew 23:15, than they do godly servants. We are not against personal witnessing, but only want to emphasize what Scripture emphasizes, for there are few texts that emphasize witnessing, but there are a great number that enjoin the preaching of the Gospel. How easy it is to get things all out of proportion in an endeavor to glorify self.

The reason for this lies in the natural tendency of man to put too much emphasis upon human works and accomplishments that the flesh might be glorified. The Holy Spirit alone can convert any person, and He does this by the instrumentality of the Word of God. “Whereunto he called you by our gospel” (2 Thess. 2:14). “. . .and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10). “. . . I have begotten you through the gospel” (1 Cor. 4:15). “Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth . . .” (Jam. 1:18). “Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever” (1 Pet. 1:23). The faithful presentation of the Gospel is the only way whereby men may be converted and become Christians.

People may be swayed by the oratory of a glib tongued witness, but they cannot be converted thereby. It is also a sad truth that some over-zealous “soul winners” have made themselves so obnoxious to lost people that the lost person made a false profession of faith in order to get rid of them. Or else he becomes so hardened that no one would ever again have an opportunity to present the Gospel to him. This writer has know some of both classes, and it has never seemed that the “soul winner” involved did anything except try to exalt himself in so doing.

The very word “evangelism” is derived from the Greek word that is translated “gospel,” so it can never be separated from the proclamation of the Gospel except to the corrupting of true evangelism. This is Satan’s fondest desire, and he cares not how zealous a Christian may be, if he is but confused or mistaken in the presentation of the truth about salvation. Let us never forget that “it is the Spirit that quickeneth,” or giveth life (John 6:63; 2 Cor. 3:6). He does this by means of the gospel, and therefore it is the duty of the church both collectively and as individual members to faithfully present the truth to the lost.

God has ordained that “Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end” (Eph. 3:21). This being so, evangelism should never be isolated from the church, for to the church was this commission given, and none but members of true churches can scripturally discharge this responsibility.

God would be more glorified, more souls would be truly saved, and fewer unregenerate people would be brought into churches, if there was less emphasis placed upon individuals “winning souls” by force of argument, and more emphasis was placed upon getting them under the Gospel as declared from the pulpits of the churches. In dealing with persons privately and individually, it is entirely too easy to resort to high pressure tactics to get them to profess Christ, but where there is the public preaching of the Gospel, this danger is greatly lessened. However, let no one use this danger as an excuse to neglect private, personal witnessing.

Great responsibility rests upon the Lord’s churches to be faithful in declaring the Gospel, for He has committed to them the Word of truth to be declared among all nations. This is one of the purposes of the churches’ existence. We dare not ignore it. But we note that the church has other duties, for we also observe—

III. It Is The Embodiment Of Converts.

By the word “embody” is meant “to form into a body,” or “to introduce into a body.” This duty is also

declared in the commission in Matthew 28:19: “baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” By baptism, a new convert is incorporated into the Body of Christ. Contrary to common belief, no one is in the Body of Christ by salvation, for this is no part of salvation. Only by water baptism is anyone brought into a Body of Christ (a church), as it is written: “For in one spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free; and were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many” (1 Cor. 12:13-14), literal rendering.

Many want this to refer to a baptism by the Holy Spirit, that is a part of salvation, but there are numerous scriptural disqualifications of this idea, a few of which are as follows. (1) Holy Spirit baptism was never “by” the Spirit, for the inspired language is always “in the Holy Spirit.” He was the element, not the agent, of it. (2) Holy Spirit baptism was never upon individuals, as such, but always upon corporate groups of people. (3) Holy Spirit baptism had nothing to do with salvation, but was always an authentication of a group of believers as a New Testament house of witness. It was similar to the coming of the Shekinah glory upon first the Tabernacle, and later upon the Temple. (4) Baptism in the Holy Spirit only occurred three, or possibly four times in history, the first three times conforming to the three divisions of the commission in Acts 1:8 as God authenticated Jews, then Samaritans, and finally Gentiles as His House of witness. The possible fourth time is in Acts 19:1-7, where the reorganization of a pseudo-church may have been authenticated by God. However, this is not so certainly the same as the first three. (5) By the time that Paul was inspired to write Ephesians 4:5 there was only one baptism, and that one water baptism. Holy Spirit baptism had by now ceased to be. (6) Though the translators capitalized “Spirit” in 1 Corinthians 12:13, it is not certain that this refers to the Holy Spirit, for the identically same phrase occurs in Philippians 1:27 where it is clearly in reference to a spiritual attitude in a believer. (7) This is in harmony with scriptural requirements, for there is a proper purpose required before any one can be scripturally baptized, and that is the possession of the “one spirit” of obedient faith that all candidates for baptism must have. (8) This is confirmed by the fact that all such converts have been made to drink of one Spirit, Who leads believers into the truth, John 16:13. (9) This baptism is “into one body,” which is the Body of Christ, the local assembly, which is the only “Church” that Scripture knows anything about (Eph. 1:22-23). Note carefully that this does not say that all are baptized into the same body, but as each person is scripturally baptized into some church, he fulfills what is written here. (10) All of this is in harmony with the meaning of the word translated “church,” for ekklesia always refers to an assembly. It can have no reference to anything that cannot and does not assemble on stated occasions. “Universal church” is a contradiction of terms.

It is common in these last apostate days of this age to teach that “salvation makes one a member of The Church,” but the Scriptures do not so speak. In the New Testament, church membership is always something that was subsequent to salvation, as we see in Acts 2:47: “But the Lord was adding those being saved daily to the church,” literal rendering. It is evident that it was not by salvation that these were daily added to the church for both the tenses and voices of the two verbs are different. “Adding” is imperfect active, while “being saved” is present passive participle. However, the fact that God daily added the new converts to the church makes it clear that this is not something to be put off indefinitely, as so many professed converts now do.

Baptism is, in the commission in Matthew 28:19, the third thing commanded, and it is to be noted that it is commanded equally with the going and the making of disciples. In both cases, it is only the will of the individual that limits the fulfillment of this duty. Churches today have become tragically lax concerning this ordinance, and whereas this was once one of the strong points of Baptist Church life, and that which marked them off from other denominations, today it is seemingly a matter of shame to many. To hold to a scriptural baptism is not to be overly zealous about a non-essential, as some would characterize it.

Baptism is a symbol of a very important reality, and it has always been so that when the symbol has been corrupted, the thing symbolized was not long kept pure.

The church has the ordinance of baptism committed to it, and it is not at liberty to either change or abolish it, but must continue to administer it in the same way that it was delivered to it, for this only is praiseworthy. "Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you" (1 Cor. 11:2). It was the uniform practice of all of the apostolic churches to administer this ordinance to every person who professed Christ, and not a single instance is left on record of the neglect of this. We have the record of a few being baptized who were not saved, as was manifested later, but not a single professed believer except the thief on the cross was suffered to neglect being baptized.

Yet many today would excuse the proper administration of this ordinance, and often practice no professed form of it on the plea that it is "non-essential." But "nonessential" to what? The phrase "non-essential" is a relative term, and cannot stand alone. It is used of two objects and their relationship to one another. To say that baptism is "non-essential" makes no sense unless what it is non-essential to is stated. Is it meant that it is non-essential to salvation? Then this is true. But so are also all other duties except faith. Does this therefore mean that we can dispense with everything except faith? Its non-essentiality to salvation does not justify the ignoring of that which the Head of the Church has commanded. And there is no such thing as any thing being non-essential to obedience.

Nothing is clearer than that the Lord has commanded His churches to administer this ordinance to all converts, and to refuse to do so under any pretense is to fly in the face of the Lord's command, and to be an outright rebel against Him. Jesus said "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day" (John 12:48). And again, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). And yet again, "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you" (John 15:14). Can anything be plainer than this? In what light, then, do these verses put those who live in disobedience?

Peter speaks of baptism in 1 Peter 3:2 1, and shows some important facts about it. "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Note that (1) Baptism is a figure, or likeness, and therefore not the actual substance. (2) It is not an actual cleansing of the filth of the flesh, which is the claim of all advocates of baptismal regeneration, but is like the salvation by water of Noah and his family (v. 20), which was only a physical deliverance. (3) It is the answer of a good conscience toward God in that it is obedience to His command.

Herein may be seen the importance of this ordinance for every born again person, for it testifies to the spiritual realities of his salvation. Baptism testifies to a changed relationship before God because of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, and this is the "answer of a good conscience toward God." Those that refuse to be baptized according to the New Testament pattern, therefore refuse to measure up to the requirements for scriptural baptism, because they count it a thing of no importance. Yet, can that be non-essential which pictures the very essence of our hope—the Gospel facts of Christ's death and resurrection?

It is the church's responsibility to baptize all those who are led to a saving knowledge of the truth by its ministry, yet it cannot do this against the convert's will. But the tragic truth is that many churches do not try to fulfill this commanded ministry. No church can be excused if this is simply a matter of neglect, but if the professed convert refuses to be baptized, then there is nothing that the church can do about it. But let every New Testament church recognize that it has a divine command to baptize all its converts into its membership, according to the apostolic pattern if it possibly can.

“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. . . And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:41, 47). It is true that some manuscripts omit the word “church” in the latter verse, but this makes little difference in the sense, and in deed, many scholars agree that the word, or some other similar in meaning is necessary to make any proper sense of this verse.

It is clear to all unbiased readers of the New Testament that Jesus not only commanded the churches of the apostolic age to baptize all their converts, but that this rule was rigidly followed, and that no exceptions are recorded. It is obvious from this, then, that those who would claim to be the same as New Testament churches must also baptize all their converts into their membership, and that according to the pattern of the New Testament.

Furthermore, the same Divine commission which enjoined these preceding duties, also commanded yet another, which is that—

IV. It Is For The Indoctrination Of The Saints.

“ . . . Teaching them to observe in a practical way all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20), literal rendering. This is no mere theoretical teaching that is commanded, for it requires the teaching of the converts “to observe” or practice those things that Jesus had commanded. To learn the theory of something is easy, but to learn to put that theory into practice is something else again, and it is in this that so many professed Christians so signally fail. Too many want only to be casual observers of Christianity instead of being soldiers in the midst of the battle.

There is a great deal of emphasis put upon the teaching of doctrine in the Scriptures, and this is the great need of the day, for all too many professed Christians know not what they should believe, and have little concern to learn. But if a church is to be really effective in fulfilling its purpose on earth, it must teach its members so as to make them sound in the faith, for a church will not long remain in the true Faith if it is not sound in that Faith. Many people disparage doctrine as though it were a thing of no matter, but it is actually impossible to either teach or preach without presenting doctrine, for this is what teaching is. Nor is it sufficient for the purpose to only dabble in a few of the “milk” doctrines, for Jesus commanded a comprehensive teaching by the church: “. . . teaching them to observe all things . . .”

That it is easy for believers to retrogress in the knowledge of the doctrines of the Word of God instead of making progress, is obvious from Hebrews 5:12-14. “For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” These Hebrew believers had not progressed beyond the infancy stage in their knowledge of the doctrines. Yea, some had even let slip some of the truths that they had gained, and hence the admonition of the writer. The statement in Hebrews 2:1 is interesting as it is in the original language: “Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them leak out as water from a leaky bucket.” This is why continual reprogramming of the mind with doctrinal truth is needed, even in mature believers. Our minds leak spiritual truth. Let any believer but think about it, and he will find that this has often happened to him.

It is always much easier for Christians to sit back and listen to an evangelistic message where all of the responsibility is put upon the lost to come to Christ for salvation, and many saved people want nothing

more than this. But it is the doctrinal messages that obligate each one to learn and apply the things learned that make for Christian growth and steadfastness. Perhaps this is why so many Christians dislike doctrinal messages—they would prefer to be left alone in their spiritual infancy.

Paul puts a great deal of emphasis upon doctrine in all of his epistles, and indeed his epistles to the Romans and Galatians are two of the most strongly doctrinal treatises ever written. In the pastoral epistles he often speaks of the need for the preacher to set forth sound doctrine to the people over whom he is set as pastor. “If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained” (1 Tim. 4:6).

The importance of sound doctrine cannot be over-emphasized in the churches, for this alone is the way to maintain a sound church. Where a church is sound in doctrine, there is not a great likelihood of it passing out of existence, for while it may become backslidden while being sound in doctrine, that very soundness in doctrine tends to correct the backslidden condition. The perpetuation of the truth is very important to a church, and is actually of greater importance than the salvation of individual souls. In Luke 13:24 the Scriptures admonish individuals to strive or agonize (Greek *agonizomai*) to enter in at the strait gate of salvation, but in Jude 3 they admonish believers to earnestly contend, or superagonize (Greek *epagonizestha*) for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For let one soul not be concerned about being saved, and the result is only that he will be lost. But let a church not be concerned about being sound in the faith, and not only will its members become doctrinally unsound, but sooner or later it will become corrupted as to the plan of redemption, and untold souls will be everlastingly lost because of its failure to perpetuate the truth. Few people realize the far-reaching effects of doctrinal looseness.

We have before remarked that a church must continue to make disciples in order to its own perpetuation. It must also faithfully indoctrinate its converts in order to maintain its original nature. For if the members of a church are not faithfully taught its doctrines, they will gradually adopt some other, looser system of doctrine and soon become so radically different from the original constitution as not to remotely resemble it. One has only to consider the present doctrinal belief of the Church of Rome as contrasted with the Roman church to which Paul wrote, to see the truth of this statement. Heresy seldom comes about in one gigantic apostasy, but rather is a prolonged departure from the truth by minute and graduated steps, no one of which is sufficient in itself to attract much attention, but which all add up to a serious declension from the truth.

The church exists in order to promote doctrinal soundness in those whom it has led to Christ and baptized because thereby only can it develop the next generation of servants of Christ to continue to carry forth the banner of the Cross. The very word “disciple” means “a learner,” and so, is suggestive of the character of the followers of Christ as being those who are constantly learning of Him and His will. This is also suggestive of the kind of a ministry that a church ought to have toward its own members. It ought to be constantly endeavoring to confirm them in the truth. Such was Paul’s practice on his missionary journeys. “And when they had preached the Gospel to that city, and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, and to Iconium, and to Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:21-22), literal rendering. Paul was concerned to leave behind him churches that were sound enough to be self-perpetuating.

Sadly enough, there are many churches that are not fulfilling their purpose so far as their own members

are concerned. They are content only to see people saved, and perhaps baptized into the membership, and then they leave them as helpless babes, weak in the faith, and fair prey to any spiritual wolf that may happen by. These things ought not to be, for our Lord has given as part of the great Magna Carta of His churches the command to teach the disciples to keep “all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” In the very nature of the case, this must be an endless task inasmuch as no one ever comes to a full and perfect knowledge in this life, and there are new members that need to be taught being constantly added to the membership.

Neither does this duty relate just to the red letter portions of the Four Gospels. The Lord’s statement in John 16:13-14 that the Holy Spirit would “receive of mine and shew it unto” the churches concerns these “all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). All of the New Testament is the Holy Spirit’s revelation to specially chosen men, who were inspired to record what Jesus had taught during His earthly ministry. Thus, the entire New Testament is “The Faith” which was once delivered to the saints (Jude 3), and is the Textbook for the Church’s teaching. Nor does this exclude the Old Testament, for that is the basis of much of the New Testament, as shown by the numerous quotations from it in the New Testament.

But furthermore, the church has an additional task, which is that—

V. It Is For The Edification Of The Church.

The word “edify” originally meant to build up an edifice or building, but this was often used in a metaphorical rather than in a literal sense. The New Testament speaks of the church as a spiritual building (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:6; 1 Pet. 2:5), so that the metaphorical sense is very appropriate. The church therefore has a purpose which is reflexive—i. e., it has a purpose which is especially concerned with its own spiritual welfare.

Every ability that a church member has ought to be bent to this end—the edification of the church. So Paul often says: “Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church. . .How is it then, brethren? When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying” (1 Cor. 14:12, 26).

The great mistake that all too many church members make is in thinking that they are permitted to live and die unto themselves, and that what they possess, they possess only for themselves. But see Romans 14:7-9. The Scriptures declare that anytime anyone is given more of anything than what is needed for one’s own sufficiency, it is given only that one may have sufficiency to abound in every good work. “And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that (the Greek word so rendered denotes purpose) ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work” (2 Cor. 9:8). In the Greek text “all” appears five times here—the number of grace.

No one is given a talent, treasure or time simply for selfish use, but it is given to be used for the spiritual building up of the church, and consequently, for the glory of God. This is why God has set certain gifted individuals in each church—that they might thereby edify the church. “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-13). Sometimes a church isn’t being edified, but this is never because of God’s failure to provide. Generally it is because the gifted person isn’t exercising his gift, or else because

the church isn't availing itself of the ability of that gifted person. Such edifying talent isn't forced upon any church. It must absorb the edifying in order to profit by it.

From this it is clear that each church must be conscious of its own gifted members, and use them for its own best interests. For a talented person who is suffered to stand idle is a loss to the church, and isn't given the opportunity to serve God as he was meant to do. Many churches are guilty of despairing in their need, or else of looking outside the membership for the help it needs, instead of prayerfully seeking God's will in the matter, then looking within itself for the answer. We heard of an instance many years ago that illustrates this. A Baptist church that had a small seminary needed a Greek teacher, and while it was contemplating trying to hire one from outside, it found that a long time lay member had taken a degree in Greek some years before, and was very knowledgeable in it. This one was hired, and served for many years in this capacity.

Only one hundred years or more ago, many churches, when they lost a pastor, would look within their own ranks for some gifted man to be ordained to this work. And often such a man lived out the rest of his days discharging this work to which he had been called by the church. It was often so that no one was more surprised at being called to this work than the man himself, yet it became obvious that this was God's will.

The twelfth chapter of I Corinthians speaks at length concerning the gifts of the Spirit, and how they are diverse the one from another, but the statement is made that "the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal" (v. 7). How needful it is that every church member have this truth impressed upon him that he might be more diligent to use his individual abilities for the profit and promotion of the church that it might indeed glorify God. Like any other kind of building in this world, the church must be constantly built up, or else it will deteriorate, for it is in the very nature of all things of this world that they decay and fall into disrepair unless they are constantly worked upon and repaired.

Tragically, most church members find it easier, and apparently more enjoyable to tear down than to build up. But what they do not realize is that it takes no talent whatsoever to tear down. Anyone with a bitter spirit can do this, but it takes real talent and dedication and spirituality to build up a church. It is a very appropriate question for each church member to ask whether he is tearing down or building up his church.

Thus, it is to be seen that the church does not exist alone for the benefit of outsiders. It also has a great responsibility to itself, to be conscious, not only of the needs of its own members, but also of the potential abilities and uses of its own members, and to put them to the very best uses. A fruit tree must first grow to substantial height, form and strength before it is capable of bearing fruit, and the same truth applies to a church. It must develop and grow inwardly as it prepares for outward service to the Lord. A church must indoctrinate and edify its own members even as it evangelizes the lost and embodies the new converts unto itself. And no church adequately discharges its proper function if any one of these is left off.

And there is one final purpose for the church's existence, and while this is inclusive of much of the foregoing, it is a more comprehensive purpose than any of the foregoing. This is that—

VI. It Is For The Extension Of The Kingdom.

Every New Testament church is an agent for the kingdom of God, and it works for the final fulfillment of the kingdom. The church and the kingdom are not the same thing, as is evident from many things. The

kingdom is universal, while the church is local. The kingdom is eternal, while the church came into existence only two thousand years ago, and is a creature of time. The kingdom encompasses both lost and saved, worshipper of God and infidel in its widest earthly form, yet the church is only for those who have professed faith in the Father and the Son. And there are many other ways in which the kingdom and the church may be contrasted, but few ways in which they may be compared. Universal church people try to make these to be the same thing.

We have said that the kingdom encompasses both lost and save, and this is true in the broadest meaning of the word, yet there is an inner circle of the kingdom which comprises the eternal form of the kingdom. This is composed only of truly born again persons (John 3:3), and the church is the agent in bringing people into this narrower form of the kingdom. Thus, Paul wrote: "Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son" (Col. 1:13). Only by experiencing the new birth is one in the Kingdom of Christ. The church accomplishes this work through the ministry of evangelism, and for this reason, as well as others, church work is also kingdom work. See what is written of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. "When they had preached the gospel to that city, and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, and to Iconium, and to Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:21-22), literal rendering. Again, on another of his missionary journeys, Paul "went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 19:8; See also Acts 28:31). According to Acts 20:24-25, his preaching of the Gospel of the grace of God, was also the preaching of the kingdom of God.

Individual churches are brought into existence, labor for a time, and then pass off the scene, but their labors, insofar as they are faithful to the Word of God, endure forever, for they accomplish the extension of the kingdom of God on earth. At present, it is doubtful if there is a true New Testament church on earth that is over three hundred years old, for in time they all come to naught, but the kingdom continues to exist, and is extended in every age by the faithful ministry of true churches. One has but to consider how often, in epistles written to churches, their labors are referred to as advancing the kingdom of God, to see that the churches are indeed agents for the kingdom of God.

Too often church members have too low an estimate of their purpose as individuals and as a corporate body, and therefore they never rise to their fullest potential in the service of the Lord. If one never thinks of the church as anything more than a human society, organized for no other reason than the fulfillment of human needs and desires, naturally one's labors are not going to be of a very high character. But let one once grasp the idea that the church is a divinely instituted body which exists for the purpose of extending the kingdom of God on earth, and it will make a great deal of difference in one's outlook and attitude. To understand that God has committed to the hands of the churches the work of extending His kingdom on earth should make every church member more cognizant of his responsibility to be faithful in all things. He actually has the power committed to him of the Lord, to extend the kingdom of God on earth. Whenever the Gospel is preached, wherever men are exhorted to repent and believe the Gospel, then and there the kingdom of God is being preached. Thus it is written: "Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:14-15). And again, Paul, after referring to his preaching of repentance and faith to the Ephesians, he denominated this the "preaching of the kingdom of God" (Acts 20:21, 25).

It is to be feared that too many Bible students, in their endeavor to establish a human theory of

dispensationalism, overlook the fact that God has a plan which works harmoniously in every dispensation, and which is not defeated by the failures and mistakes of men. The fulfillment of this plan is what is referred to in the Scriptures as "The kingdom of God," and is that which glorifies God. Thus, this plan ought to be the determining factor in all human plans and actions. Every Christian ought to take this plan into consideration in every thing that he does, and nothing ought to ever be done which would be out of harmony with it. If this were the case, then all New Testament churches would always be very effective agents in the extension of the kingdom. Unfortunately, such is not the case. When all things are considered, the church has a formidable task committed to it, and one that could never be discharged but for divine grace and power. Yet, the Lord has given to every New Testament church all that is needed to faithfully fulfill its purpose on earth, and consequently, no church has any excuse for redelegating any of its responsibilities to any one else. Each one must either do its duties, or else be accountable for its neglect of them. It is an indictment of the wisdom of God to claim that God had ordained a work for His churches which is impractical for them to do in this day. God foresaw and took into consideration all exigencies before He ordained the age-spanning work of the churches. Therefore it behooves all churches which claim to be patterned after those of the New Testament to lay aside all human inventions and reasonings, and to return in obedience to the simplicity of first century Christianity. When this is done, then may the churches expect to receive the Lord's blessings.

Nothing so frustrates the fulfillment of a church's responsibilities like putting too much dependence upon either human wisdom or human strength. God has so ordered all things that they shall contribute to His eternal glory, and whatsoever detracts from that is wrong, no matter how reasonable or appealing it may appear to human minds. Satan cares not how zealous one may be if he can only be diverted from the right purposes, or led to do things in wrong ways, or from wrong motives.

[Return to Baptist History and Gallery Writings](#)