

Why Church?

BY Andrew Bardsley

Why church?

What is church anyway?

Does a Christian really have to go to church?

How do our ideas about church line up with God's ideas?

At times we may wonder what church is all about. Sometimes today the church can seem insignificant and marginal to society. At times church can even seem divorced from the reality of our daily lives. What's worse, we may absorb some of the negative stereotypes of church which are so common in the mainstream media. Even the positive representations of the church in the media usually have little to do with what the church is really about. Have you ever stopped to wonder, 'Why church?' and 'What is it really all about anyway?'

Church is at the heart of God's purposes

God's vision of church is very different from the images we see in the media, and probably from our own stereotypical ideas too. It is not a vision of

buildings, traditions, or even the usual forms of worship which we equate with the church service. The church is the people of God. Our word **church** translates the Greek word **ἐκκλησία** (**ecclesia** - 'church', 'assembly' or 'gathering' of people). The church is God gathering a people for himself.

Church is at the heart of God's purposes in the world. The church is the expression of the Kingdom of God breaking into the world. It is heaven invading earth – quietly, subversively, calling people away from lives of slavery to sin, self and the prevailing values of society to be a people for

God. It is God saving people from sin and death and hell. This in-breaking of the Kingdom of God was announced by the prophets and inaugurated at the coming of Christ, and is progressively being fulfilled in the holy, universal church (all true believers in every time and place) through the ages of human history by the work of the Holy Spirit in the world.



What about us? Now, a little over 2000 years later, each one of us is called into this people of God. We are called to be part of this world-wide revolution from darkness to light, from brokenness to wholeness, from evil to good, from death to life. Does our vision of the church live up to God's grand vision?

The Whole Bible and the Mission of God

A brief survey of the Bible reveals that the church is at the heart of God's purposes for the world. God's plan of saving a people for himself can be seen throughout salvation history. From God's call of Abraham and promise to bless all nations through his offspring (Genesis 12:3, 18:18, 22:18) to the ultimate fulfilment of the promise (Revelation 5). It is seen in the salvation of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to be God's chosen people (Exodus 19:3-6, Deut 7:6). It is seen in the purpose of Israel to be a light to the nations that God's salvation may reach the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:6). Ultimately it is fulfilled in the work of Christ on the cross to purchase people for God from 'every tribe and language and people and nation' (Revelation 5:9-10) and in the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit through

the church in the world. Jesus boldly declares 'I will build my church' (Matt 16:18). The church is God's central purpose in the world. Being part of God's church is the present privilege and ultimate destiny of each one of God's people.

'God is the initiator of His mission to redeem through the Church a special people for Himself from all of the peoples of the world. He sent His Son for this purpose and He sends the Church into the world with the message of the gospel for the same purpose'. – Van Sanders¹

What about us? Do we see church as our highest privilege? Do we recognise that this humble earthly reality is an expression of a great heavenly reality? Do we see that this fellowship of love among brothers and sisters in Christ is our ultimate destiny – as one body in Christ, with one heart and one voice giving glory and praise to God through Christ Jesus by God's Spirit who lives in us? Does what we do when we meet as a church each Sunday live up to God's grand design? Does how we sing and serve and talk with each other and love one another express our divine purpose? Does how we live as God's people through the week live up to our high calling?

The Great Commission and our Mission

Since the church is at the heart of God's Mission, it is no surprise that church planting and church growth is at the heart of the Great Commission Jesus gave to his disciples. It is easy to overlook the fact that at the completion of Jesus' earthly ministry, what he had achieved was the creation of the church. 'Jesus... did not write a book but formed a community'². He had not held a revolution, started an organisation, transformed society, eradicated poverty or sickness, but he had called a people to himself and formed a church, albeit a very small one at the time.

The Great Commission is given by Jesus to his church for the building of his church. The Great Commission of Jesus calls his followers to take the gos-

pel message to all nations through preaching, witness, discipleship, going, baptising, and teaching, i.e. by churching together (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). No aspect of the great commission is singular. All of the commissions occur in the plural and they can only be carried out as part of the body of believers. Thus the church is essential to the Great Commission. The community of Jesus is the starting point, the means and the end goal of the Great Commission.

What about us? Are we doing the work Jesus commissioned us to do? Have you heard the challenge of the Great Commission? Is your life ordered according to God's priorities? Is church at the heart of your life? Is being a member of God's People and building up God's people and inviting others into God's people at the centre of your purposes in life?

¹Van Sanders, "The Mission of God and the Local Church," in *Pursuing the Mission of God in Church Planting*, ed. John M. Bailey (Alpharetta: North American Mission Board, 2006), 24.

²Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 227

