The Purpose of the Church

Systematic Theology VI: Ecclesiology & Eschatology · Lecture 4 of 10

C. Michael Patton, Th.M., and Rhome Dyke, Th.M. · The Theology Program · 60 minutes

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Lecture by C. Michael Patton, Th.M., and Rhome Dyke, Th.M., from The Theology Program, published on their public channel. Study notes from Medina Community Church.

BEFORE YOU WATCH

Before this session, the teachers emailed every pastor at their church one question: what is the purpose of the church? No two answered the same. This class asks the question in its sharpest form, why is the church here and not in heaven, then watches every easy answer wobble. Listen for the purpose almost nobody names, the one the teachers find in Eden, in Enoch, and in the Westminster line most people quote only halfway.

STUDY SHEET

1. From nature to purpose

The course is built to narrow deliberately: nature first, then purpose, then ministries, then gifts, because the ministries carry out the purpose, and the purpose adheres to the nature. Having settled last week on a definition both dispensationalists and replacement theologians can share, the church as the unified continued presence of Christ composed of all who have trusted in the gospel, the class turns to purpose, and the teachers confess it is less clear than they expected. Their conversation began months earlier in an office, spread to an email asking every pastor of their own church for the purpose of the church, and came back without two matching answers. Different churches emphasize different things, and their traditions and their view of the church's nature drive those emphases.

2. Two paradigms reviewed: gospel or institution

A review from earlier in the program frames everything. On the Protestant reading of history, the church was formulated, corruption crept in, the East broke away in the schism of 1054, and eventually the Roman church departed, not first from the church but from the gospel, when salvation by faith alone gave way to salvation administered through the sacraments of the institution. On that timeline the church is defined by the gospel: sever yourself from the gospel and you have severed yourself from the church, a judgment about institutions, the teachers stress, never about every individual within them. Rome reads the same history with the church defined by the institution: the church must define the gospel, because without a guardian of interpretation there is nothing to unify around, so the institution is the guardian of the truth. The teachers paraphrase Pope John Paul: people are saved through the church and in the church, but always by the grace of Christ, grace God has appointed the church to administer, with the keys to bind and to loose. These two paradigms will quietly shape every answer to tonight's question.

3. Why is the church here and not in heaven?

After trying many phrasings, the teachers land on the question in its best form: why is the church here, and not in heaven? The class votes. Most hands go up for spreading the gospel as the primary purpose. Others offer equipping the saints, worshiping God, and, broadest of all, glorifying God, with the suggestion that evangelism is one way the worship purpose is administered. The answers are all defensible, and the discussion is only beginning.

4. The answers, tested

The teachers press a question that unsettles the list: which of these purposes is unique to the church rather than simply the purpose of any individual? Glorify God, worship, evangelize, meet needs, an individual can own every one. What the community adds is real but different: it is hard to equip yourself, and the gifts by their nature find their need and their expression in a larger body; no one is gifted to teach himself. The purpose of the church, they suggest, will not be drastically different from the purpose of man, because Pentecost was not a brand new plan but the same purpose finding broader and broader expression, exactly the continuity last week argued for.

5. Abraham, Enoch, and the purpose nobody named

What would Abraham have called his purpose? Not evangelism in the way we picture it. Scripture emphasizes his faith, his obedience, his worship, his walking with God, though the blessing of the nations was built into his covenant from Genesis 12, and the kingdom of priests language at Sinai made all Israel representatives of God to the nations. Moses' era adds the emphasis of holiness, separateness. Then Enoch, of whom almost nothing is said except that he walked with God and was not, for God took him: friendship language, satisfaction language. That introduces a purpose no one in the room had named: enjoying God. The teachers recall the question from the humanity course, why God created man at all: not because he needed to be glorified, which would make him needy and self absorbed in a way Scripture never presents him, but because it is his nature to give. Genesis 1 is gift after gift, and our glorifying him is our response and our fulfillment, which is why the Westminster answer has two halves, to glorify God and to enjoy him forever, and why dropping the second half turns the first into drudgery.

6. Nine purposes on the table

The teachers then lay out the full catalog. A communal purpose: the church is here to take part in relationship with God and one another. A holy purpose: to fight against sin, or put positively, to live righteously, with even a cosmic dimension from Ephesians 6, where the struggle is not against flesh and blood. A doxological purpose: to worship God. An authoritative purpose: to represent Christ's ruling authority and to protect the truth. A sociological purpose: to represent Christ's mercy and love. An evangelistic purpose: to spread the gospel to the lost. A discipleship purpose: to help people grow in Christ. A hedonistic purpose: to enjoy God and the world God created, a word the teachers borrow, with credit, from John Piper, who calls himself a Christian hedonist because he is here to enjoy God. And a panoramic purpose: to glorify God in whatever we do, which the teachers half joke is almost a cop out purpose, true but too broad to guide anything until the others define it.

7. How each purpose gets abused

Every purpose on the list has been overextended somewhere in church history. Push the authoritative purpose too far and the church infiltrates government, launches crusades, fights popes against kings, and turns guardian of holiness into legalism, where the purpose of the church becomes, as the teachers put it, to make a list and make it longer, and the relationship with God becomes a relationship with the rules. Push the sociological purpose alone and you get the liberal social gospel of the early twentieth century, which is why institutions like the Salvation Army still suffer unfair associations. Push accommodation for the sake of numbers and the worship purpose thins out, the beauty, mystery, and awe traded away for whatever works. And the churches that press holiness while canceling enjoyment become, in the teachers' words, the last place you would go to enjoy God. Emphasize one purpose and you almost always lose another; that imbalance, as much as doctrine, explains why there are so many different churches.

8. Can balance live across many churches?

The discussion turns practical and unresolved. If Billy Graham started a church, everyone knows what it would emphasize, and its whole service would be shaped to serve evangelism, which is exactly what seeker sensitive churches do, and if evangelism really is the primary purpose, what exactly is wrong with that? Patton tells on himself: his own ordination examined his doctrine and his ability to disciple, not his evangelistic record, because this church carries a strong discipleship purpose. Could balance live not in each congregation but across the community of churches, a teaching church, a worship church, a mercy church cooperating? It would work, the teachers grant, if churches actually communicated that way, which mostly they do not, leaving individuals either imbalanced or church hopping. Denominations can conference toward balance; a genuinely institutional church can govern it, and the teachers caution against discounting Rome's answers too quickly just because of the baggage, even while holding that some of that baggage was the gospel itself. Balance is needed in space and in time, continuity with the generations of churches before us and after us, because if the church is the continued presence of Christ, its expression should look like Christ, who was balanced. No tidy solution is offered; last week's surprise answer, Patton jokes, was a once in a lifetime event.

9. The chart, and what only earth allows

A chart in the notes asks students to rate each purpose from zero to ten, with one rule: they cannot all be ten, because a purpose that outranks nothing guides nothing, and the class laughs at the shortcut of scoring everything ten and calling it balance. Then a clarifying question: which purposes can be accomplished only on the earth? Fighting against sin, showing mercy to the suffering, and evangelizing the lost; worship, fellowship, and enjoying God go on forever. Some, especially in the missions movement, have reasoned from exactly that observation: whatever can only be done here must be why we are still here.

10. A Scripture survey of purpose, from Genesis to the Gospels

The teachers then read the purpose statements of Scripture and name what each expresses. Genesis 1: be fruitful, multiply, fill, subdue, rule, with every plant and tree given for food, a giving God and, from the very first page, a hedonistic purpose alongside an authoritative one. Genesis 5: Enoch walked with God, enjoyment again. Genesis 9: the commission renewed to Noah, authority over the creatures and the blessing of fruitfulness. Exodus 19: a kingdom of priests, sent outward to the nations, and a holy nation, kept pure. Deuteronomy 10: what does the LORD require but to revere him, love him, serve him with all your mind and being, and keep his commandments, a purpose God never withdrew but developed. Ecclesiastes 12: fear God and keep his commandments, the whole duty of man. Micah 6: he has told you what he wants, justice, faithfulness, obedience, a holy purpose joined to a sociological one. Psalm 103: praise with all that is within me, the doxological purpose. Matthew 16, the first mention of the church in the Bible: upon this rock I will build my church, the gates of Hades will not overpower it, and the keys of the kingdom with binding and loosing, authority, and evangelism too, since keys are for opening. Matthew 28, the Great Commission: make disciples of all nations, and note how, by baptizing and teaching, so evangelism and discipleship are one command. John 20: as the Father sent me, I send you, with the breathed Spirit and the forgiving and retaining of sins, the sent ones carrying a real authority.

11. The survey continued: the epistles

Acts 1: power from the Holy Spirit and witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the farthest parts of the earth. 1 Corinthians 10: whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God, the panoramic purpose that must not be left alone to define everything. Colossians 3: whatever you do in word or deed, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus, working with enthusiasm as to the Lord and not for people, with an inheritance for a reward, panoramic, holy, and, in the reward, hedonistic again. 1 Timothy 3: the household of God, the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth, an authoritative and discipling charge given, the teachers note, to something larger than one local congregation. 1 Peter 4: whoever speaks, with God's words; whoever serves, with God's strength, so that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. And 1 John 5: this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments, and his commandments are not a burden, obedience and enjoyment refusing to be separated.

12. Emphasis across redemptive history

Laid across the ages, the purposes show shifting emphasis rather than replacement. Eden was hedonistic before anything else, enjoy what I have given, with holiness implied and authority granted in the commission to rule. Abraham's age was doxological and hedonistic, a man finding his fulfillment in the friendship of God. The Mosaic age emphasized worship, holiness, and the priestly mission to the nations. The present New Testament age emphasizes worship, community, evangelism, and holiness. The kingdom, and the one people of God in the new heavens and the new earth, will be doxological and hedonistic: worship and enjoyment, with the pain gone. The chart is not a menu of what to keep; the teachers insist the church must take the whole, refusing to let the holiness idea cancel the enjoyment or the enjoyment cancel the holiness, the evangelism cancel the discipleship, since the common failure of churches is one purpose promoted and all the rest demoted out of sight.

13. God most glorified, and we most satisfied

Wayne Grudem's threefold summary is offered as a clean frame: ministry to God, ministry to believers, ministry to the world. Then the teachers give their own general definition, the sentence the rest of the course builds on: the purpose of the church is to worship and enjoy God, representing Christ through evangelistic outreach, discipleship, social concern, fellowship, and holiness. And when all of these are accomplished, God is most glorified, and we are most satisfied.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Genesis 1 · Genesis 5 · Genesis 9 · Genesis 12 · Exodus 19 · Deuteronomy 10 · Psalms 103 · Ecclesiastes 12 · Micah 6 · Matthew 16 · Matthew 28 · John 20 · Acts 1 · 1 Corinthians 10 · Ephesians 6 · Colossians 3 · 1 Timothy 3 · 1 Peter 4 · 1 John 5

KEY TERMS

Doxological purpose

: The church's purpose of worshiping God: speaking and communing to God and he to us, through word, prayer, song, testimony, and the visible word of the ordinances, defined here especially in its corporate expression.

Hedonistic purpose

: The purpose of enjoying God and the world he created, a word borrowed with credit from John Piper, who calls himself a Christian hedonist. Present from Eden onward, and the half of the Westminster answer most often dropped.

Panoramic purpose

: Glorifying God in whatever we do, as in 1 Corinthians 10. True everywhere and therefore, on its own, too broad to guide anything; the teachers call it almost a cop out purpose until the others define it.

Authoritative purpose

Representing Christ's ruling authority and protecting the truth, grounded in the keys of Matthew 16 and the sending of John 20. Rome emphasizes it most; overextended, it produced crusades, church-state battles, and legalism.

Sociological purpose

Representing Christ's mercy and love in meeting real human need, joined to the call of Micah 6 to promote justice. Overemphasized alone, it becomes the social gospel; neglected, the church abandons what Christ himself did.

Evangelistic and discipleship purposes

Spreading the gospel to the lost and helping people grow in Christ, joined in the Great Commission itself: make disciples of all nations, by baptizing and by teaching.

Communal purpose

The church's purpose of relationship, with God and among believers: the fellowship in which the gifts find their need and their expression, since no one is gifted for himself.

Holy purpose

Fighting against sin, or put positively, living righteously, with a cosmic edge from Ephesians 6, where the struggle is not against flesh and blood.

The keys of the kingdom

Christ's grant in Matthew 16, spoken to Peter as representative and in John 20 to the apostles together: authority to bind and loose, and, since keys are for opening, an evangelistic charge as well.

Pillar and support of the truth

Paul's description of the church of the living God in 1 Timothy 3: the household of God carries an authoritative, guarding, discipling responsibility for the truth entrusted to it.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Answer each question, then check yourself against the key at the end of this section.

1. What did the teachers discover when they emailed their own pastors about the purpose of the church?

   A. Every pastor gave the same answer

   B. No two pastors answered with the same purpose

   C. None of the pastors replied at all

   D. The pastors voted to cancel the class

2. On the Protestant paradigm, what defines the church?

   A. The gospel: to sever yourself from the gospel is to sever yourself from the church, a judgment about institutions rather than every individual

   B. The institution: whoever holds the offices holds the church

   C. The building in which worship occurs

   D. The nation in which the church resides

3. How does the Roman paradigm answer the question of who defines the gospel?

   A. Each believer defines it privately

   B. The gospel needs no definition

   C. The church must define it, as guardian of the truth, since without a guardian of interpretation there is nothing to unify around

   D. The universities define it

4. What is the sharpest form of tonight's question?
   A. How large should a church be?
   B. When did the church begin?
   C. Which denomination is oldest?
   D. Why is the church here, and not in heaven?

5. What test unsettled the class's first answers?
   A. Whether each purpose appears in the creeds
   B. Whether each purpose is unique to the church rather than simply the purpose of any individual
   C. Whether each purpose was practiced in the first century
   D. Whether each purpose can be measured numerically

6. What do the gifts show about the community's role in purpose?
   A. The gifts by nature find their need and expression in a larger body; no one is gifted to teach himself
   B. The gifts are given for private use first
   C. The gifts replace the need for community
   D. Only leaders receive gifts

7. What purpose does Enoch introduce that no one in the room had named?
   A. Church discipline
   B. Political engagement
   C. Enjoying God: he walked with God, friendship and satisfaction language, and God took him
   D. Temple construction

8. Why do the teachers refuse to say God created man because he needed to be glorified?
   A. Because glory is a New Testament idea only
   B. Because man was created before glory existed
   C. Because Scripture never mentions glory
   D. Because that would make God needy, which Scripture never presents; he created because it is his nature to give, and our glorifying him is our response and fulfillment

9. From whom do the teachers borrow the word hedonistic, and with what meaning?
   A. From the Stoics, meaning avoidance of pleasure
   B. From John Piper, who calls himself a Christian hedonist because he is here to enjoy God
   C. From Rome, meaning the administration of the sacraments
   D. From the liberal tradition, meaning social action

10. Why do the teachers call the panoramic purpose almost a cop out?
    A. Because glorifying God is unimportant
    B. Because it appears only once in Scripture
    C. Because it is true of everything and therefore, on its own, too broad to guide anything until the other purposes define it
    D. Because it was invented in the nineteenth century

11. What happens when the authoritative purpose is pushed too far?

    A. The church grows more generous

    B. The church infiltrates government, launches crusades, and turns guardianship into legalism, a relationship with the rules instead of with God

    C. The church abandons all structure

    D. Nothing; authority cannot be abused

12. What honest question does the Billy Graham thought experiment raise?

    A. Whether evangelists should found churches at all

    B. Whether ordination should be abolished

    C. If evangelism really is the church's primary purpose, what exactly is wrong with shaping the whole service to serve it, as seeker sensitive churches do?

    D. Whether services should have music

13. Which purposes can be accomplished only on the earth?

    A. Worship, fellowship, and enjoying God

    B. Fighting sin, showing mercy to the suffering, and evangelizing the lost; the others continue forever

    C. All nine purposes end at death

    D. None; every purpose is limited to earth

14. What two purposes does Genesis 1 already express?

    A. A giving God's hedonistic purpose, every tree given for food, and an authoritative one, the commission to subdue and rule

    B. Evangelism and discipleship

    C. The sacraments and the priesthood

    D. Neither; Genesis 1 contains no purpose statements

15. How does the Great Commission join two purposes in one command?

    A. By separating baptism from teaching

    B. By limiting the command to the apostles

    C. By addressing Israel rather than the church

    D. Make disciples of all nations, by baptizing and by teaching: evangelism and discipleship in a single charge

16. What does 1 John 5 refuse to separate?

    A. Obedience and enjoyment: we keep his commandments, and his commandments are not a burden

    B. Faith and baptism

    C. Preaching and prophecy

    D. The visible and invisible church

17. What was the emphasis of Eden, on the teachers' reading?

    A. Evangelistic before all else

    B. Hedonistic before anything else, enjoy what I have given, with holiness implied and authority granted

    C. Sociological before all else

    D. Purely doxological with no other purpose

18. What is the course's final definition of the church's purpose?

A. To administer the sacraments through the institution

B. To await the end times in separation from the world

C. To worship and enjoy God, representing Christ through evangelism, discipleship, social concern, fellowship, and holiness; when all are accomplished, God is most glorified and we are most satisfied

D. To grow as large as possible in each generation

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 A · 3 C · 4 D · 5 B · 6 A · 7 C · 8 D · 9 B · 10 C · 11 B · 12 C · 13 B · 14 A · 15 D · 16 A · 17 B · 18 C

TALK IT OVER

1. Take the chart seriously: rate the nine purposes for your own church, zero to ten, without letting everything be a ten. Which purpose scored highest, which got demoted out of sight, and what would one concrete step toward balance look like this year?

2. The teachers said some churches are the last place you would go to enjoy God. Has holiness ever canceled enjoyment in your own walk, or enjoyment canceled holiness? What would it mean this week to keep his commandments and find them no burden?

3. Patton noticed that his ordination revealed his church's real emphasis. What do your church's hiring, budgeting, and calendar reveal about its functional purpose, as opposed to its stated one, and how should the two be brought together?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

The Great Commission binds the purposes together: all authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Christ, so his church goes to make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching, with his promise to be with us to the end of the age.