

THE PRIMARY PURPOSE Mk.II

Rediscovering the Biblical Reason for the Church



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THE PRIMARY PURPOSE

Christian faith has lost its way in the western world. We have allowed our calling as the church to be ravaged by the most effective anti-gospel culture in history. The facts speak for themselves: decreasing numbers, marginalized influence and embarrassing moral issues are symptoms of deeper and more complex maladies. Even the comparative success of a few notable ministries has lost some of its vicarious lustre. The core problem is that we have abdicated our responsibility regarding the primary purpose. Jesus gave a clear singular mission to the church and we have lost sight of it.

It is alarming that we have been able to cover it up so well for so long. Worse still is the fact that our compromised way of following Jesus in the West has been held up as the benchmark for other parts of the world. Sadly, the western church is the least effective of all. Our greatest achievements seem to be competing with each other and multiplying division. Add our capacity for moral compromise and you have a very toxic brew. Perhaps we have unwittingly taken our role model from the church of Laodicea.¹

Such realities find us willing to preoccupy ourselves with almost any program or activity except ones that seek to fulfil the work Jesus commissioned us to complete. That work is described in the New Testament in what we have come to call the “Great Commission” statements.² It is the responsibility to fully preaching the gospel³ to every person. Even the most superficial survey of church congregations will confirm its neglect. In some cases it is directly opposed and in others simply ignored. Even the churches that honour the doctrine don’t often do the work. Where there are genuine commitments to the work of the gospel they are often limited to inefficient institutional programs that depend on professionals rather than a lifestyle priority for ordinary believers. Instead of a general passion for loving lost people we waste our time, energy and resources on activities that largely ignore them.

Setting aside the work of the Great Commission as the primary mission for the church has not happened suddenly. It is the result of an almost imperceptible undermining by our secular culture and its appeal to what the New Testament refers to as “the flesh”.

¹ Revelations 3. This church valued wealth and self-satisfaction but not the presiding presence of Jesus. Their lukewarm commitment made even the risen Christ feel sick to the stomach.

² Matthew 24:14; 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:8

³ The idea of “preaching the gospel” itself needs to be delivered from the narrow band meaning it has adopted courtesy of some influential strands of evangelicalism. For many people it has come to mean little more than offering people the assurance of a ticket to heaven when they die. This dualism has also tended to lock evangelism into a cerebral debating match rather than offering people, as Jesus modelled for us, the opportunity to taste the power of God’s love. Preaching the gospel needs to be re-married to the full exercise of kingdom ministry and the gospel needs to be the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 24:14)

Instead of a direct attack, the enemy has simply drawn our focus away from the most important thing to an endless variety of things that may seem important but are not primary. Their attraction comes from the fact that they are all good things in and of themselves. Almost all these activities are really tools for the work. But the tools for the task have become the task. It is not wrong to pray or to worship, nor is it not wrong to discuss points of theology. It is wrong to spend our time doing those things to the exclusion of loving and reaching every lost person. We can pray, read the Bible, meet in home groups, gather for worship, become wrapped in the latest spiritual vogue, go to conferences and participate in training courses that never see a single extra lost person loved let alone offered salvation.

ONLY GREAT COMMISSION WORK IS PRIMARY

The fact that none of these substitutes represent the *primary* purpose is soon discovered by allowing the ministry of Jesus and the testimony of the Scripture to say what they mean and mean what they say.

- a. **It was the singular final command of Jesus.** None of the substitutes referred to above were given by Jesus as “the work to be done by the church.” Prior to his ascension Jesus didn’t tell the disciples to go into all the work and pray, conduct services of worship, read the Bible or do any of the others. He just told us to make sure the gospel was proclaimed to every person. It is the heart desire of our Commander and his explicit instruction.⁴
- b. **It is the only task that will define completion.** Not one of the non-primary activities will cause the work to be complete, no matter how well we do them or how many of them we do well. They provide the tools but they do not do the job. If we become the most ardent intercessors, worshippers or Bible experts we would still need to obey Jesus’ command to go and preach the gospel to all people. Only when we had fulfilled that command could we stand before Jesus and say that the work was done.
- c. **It is the only focus that reproduces the ministry of Jesus.** For three years Jesus taught and lived a life of preaching the gospel to every person. What he did among the people of Israel he commanded his disciples to do among all the nations. He said plainly that he had come to seek and save what was lost. He told a parable about leaving ninety-nine sheep in the fold in order to search for a single one that was lost. Most importantly, the fulfilling of the Great Commission is the only work that does justice to his atoning death on the cross.

⁴ Matthew 24:14; 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:8

- d. **It only represents the nature of God revealed throughout Scripture.** Only Great Commission work picks up the missionary heart of a God - seeking Adam and Eve in the garden,⁵ sending Abram to bless all the families of the earth,⁶ calling his people to be a nation of priests⁷ and having a house built as a “house of prayer for all nations”.⁸ We cannot be God’s people unless we embody his revealed nature and purpose in our own generation.
- e. **It is the only task that worthily honours the people God loves.** When individual Christians or Christian groups become preoccupied with other things we are robbing lost people of something God has provided for them. They not only need what we are able to offer but deserve it. One of the signs of compromise with our self-indulgent culture is for Christian believers to be content with their own salvation and equally content to see others remain separated from Christ. No amount of theological gymnastics can cover our collective shame on this matter.

NON-PRIMARY ACTIVITIES ARE THE TOOLS FOR THE WORK

When preaching the gospel to all people becomes our primary purpose everything else fits into place. Powerful things happen inside people when they realize the majesty of indiscriminate redemptive love so profoundly contained in the ministry of Jesus and the gospel. The challenge to proclaim it to every person creates some immediate tensions. The task seems impossible. The human resources seem inadequate. The work is hard and uncomfortable. We often simply don’t know how to do it. These tensions simply highlight the superficiality of our relationship with God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If such tensions are to find a resolve it must be in the pursuit of a new kind of fellowship with the Father and the Son,⁹ namely the kind that was always intended by God and that will make us equal to the task. Here are some examples of how religious badges become tools.

The Bible. If my task is to find God’s way of reaching every person with the ministry of the gospel, then I need the Bible more than ever - not as a devotional resource, but as an urgent source of supernatural wisdom and revelation.

Prayer. When I come to understand that lost people need to be loved I become aware of my lack. I will then pursue God until HIS love fills my heart. I may then understand that such love can only come from a close and intimate fellowship with the Father and the Son. Prayer will be the starting point for this pursuit but not its end point. It will require a persistence and intimacy that will

⁵ Genesis 3.

⁶ Genesis 12.

⁷ Leviticus 19.

⁸ Mark 11.

⁹ First John 1:1-4.

take it way beyond religious duty. We may then discover David's two secrets: the harp and the sword. He set down the sword because he needed to pick up his harp. When he set down his harp he was again qualified to pick up his sword

Unity. If the twenty-five thousand believers in my home city of Canberra are called to reach three hundred and twenty thousand lost people, then we can ONLY do it if we work in unity. A common commitment to the task, rather than convenience, will shape our inter-dependence. The sense of need for such unity will not be found in what we get out of it but will be measured by whether our communities are being changed by it.

Holy Spirit Power. If God has provided the Holy Spirit to provide supernatural power then we need that power, not just to have a nice time inside a building on Sunday but because we need to crash through the walls that lock people away from the experience of Jesus' love. It won't be a denominational badge, but rather an essential weapon in the spiritual battle.

Discipleship. When a church comes to realize that its primary purpose is to participate in the goal of reaching every person, it will see the need to make disciples, not just fill pews with spectators. How can we justify a theological merry-go-round that seems to spawn arrogance and division when the issues that often consume us are almost meaningless to the 90%+ of our communities who need a simple taste of the Saviour's mercy?

Allowing our priorities to be shaped by the task of preaching the gospel to every person makes sense of all other Christian activities. We will then see the non-primary activities fulfilling their true function as divine tools of trade. This overarching purpose acts as a self-correcting device for the way we use the tools and why we use them.

WHY HAS THE TASK OF PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL GONE MISSING?

A question that needs to be asked is, "If the command of Jesus is so clear and specific, why does it become so faint and seem so distant to so many who are followers of Christ? Why do their hearts reflect so little of the redemptive passion that sent Jesus to the cross?" Here are some 'very believable lies' that have done serious damage.

1. **Theological Mistruth:** *"God will do it"* When William Carey spoke to the gathering of his English Baptist colleagues about the need to go to the nations of the world and preach the gospel, he met the following, now famous response: *"Young man, sit down; when God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid or mine."* Throughout Christian history resistance to the idea of proclaiming the gospel has been justified by a variety of false but Biblical-sounding arguments. It started even in the earliest times with an assumption that the

gospel should only be preached to Jews.¹⁰ At other times it has been expressed in some of the more extreme forms of Calvinism. More recently we have seen the influence of humanistic philosophy, e.g. universalism.

It is time we set aside the lofty systems that have stained our interpretation of simple clear Biblical texts and get our mandate solely from the pages of Scripture. The combination of the Spirit and the Word in daily life will alone provide divine synergy that can wake the sleepers and re-kindle the fire of God. He told US to go and do it. That's the simple Biblical fact. It is a command, not an option.

2. **Comfort Driven Discipleship:** *"It's too hard for me to do it."* Western culture, with its emphasis on the individual, inevitably pressurizes Christians to forsake selfless cross-bearing discipleship¹¹ and establishes the thrones of personhood around self-gratification, self-preservation and self-determination. As such we keep on producing a form of spirituality that claims to be Christian but is patently built on self-centred values. The call to preach the gospel to every person is readily set aside simply because it requires a level of selflessness that many believers are less than willing to embrace. That's why they prefer to leave it up to the professionals and programs.

We need to re-evaluate our discipleship contract. We need to read Matthew 16 and Luke 9 to see whether we have clearly understood the terms and conditions of Biblical discipleship. We need to start noticing what God is concerned about rather than assuming He exists to make us feel more comfortable or to bless our personal preferences.

3. **Shopping Mall Approach to Ministry:** *"Those with the gifts will do it."* One of the spin-offs of the prolific teaching on spiritual gifts is that it has made church look a bit like a shopping mall. All the different ministries gather in their departments much like the different sections of a mall. People tend to specialize and locate together in departments. The resulting ministry misrepresents and fragments the ministry modelled by Jesus. Believers who do gift surveys are generally relieved when they find that they don't have the "gift" of evangelism. That work is then left to the few brave souls who do.

We should see the spiritual gift spectrum as it really is: a supernatural resource for preaching the gospel, not for playing spiritual games with one another. My challenge to the surveys is to question what they are actually measuring. It may be that they are measuring fallen human nature rather than powerful Biblical promise. My encouragement to all believers would be to seek the gifts that will help them do the job. I think the New Testament calls those the "best gifts."¹²

¹⁰ Acts 8.

¹¹ Luke 9:23.

¹² First Corinthians 14:12.

4. **Club Church:** *“We’re too busy to do it.”* Churches often operate like clubs. They end up existing for the sake of keeping the members contented and entertained. Some time ago I read an article describing the many attractions offered by a large church. Within a few days I happened to watch an advertisement for a certain Club Med.¹³ I was shocked by the similarity of the two presentations. It made me realize that churches are prone to occupy themselves with interests that impact those who are already members. The Biblical idea of church is a group of people in a given sphere who are committed to the work of the gospel of the kingdom to that sphere. Neil Cole talks about this when he says that we need to “lower the bar of church and raise the bar of discipleship”.¹⁴ Instead of ‘club church’ we need the corporate expression to be a missions calling, training, sending and supporting agency – a forward operations base of a spiritual SAS deploying troops to take back territory that belongs to God but is dominated by the enemy.

5. **Professionalism.** *“The professionals will do it.”* Even though the Reformation re-discovered the Biblical truth of the priesthood of all believers most of the reformers were not prepared to fully apply it. As a result, we continue to see a form of Old Testament ‘professional’ priesthood doing the work FOR the non-professional believers. Sadly, most church people in the West are more than willing to leave it up to the professionals and professionals seem willing to embrace the co-dependency. This cosy arrangement may well satisfy the members of an average congregation but, as usual, the losers are the lost people in the community.

The assumption of the New Testament is that all believers have been called and authorized for this work and must be equipped in order to do it.¹⁵

6. **Institutionalism.** *“The programs will do it.”* There is a broad assumption that church programs are the best tool for reaching lost people. Church members are encouraged to offer their non-believing friends a church service or church-based activity. It usually requires the non-believing person to leave their native environment and enter ‘church world’. The program, rather than persons, carries the burden of making Christ tangible to them.

In contrast, the Bible assumes that the kingdom of God should be IN every believer so that THEY are the sinner-friendly, sinner-attracting agency. They should be the proclamation and the presence of heaven’s promise regardless of time or place.

¹³ Club Med is an international chain of luxury holiday resorts renowned for offering the ultimate experience of personal pleasure and indulgence.

¹⁴ Neil Cole, *Organic Church*; Jossey-Bass (September 8, 2005).

¹⁵ Ephesians 4.

FIVE GREAT COMMISSION ASSUMPTIONS

1. **All believers.** Just as Jesus placed the onus of responsibility on all of the apostles, so the same responsibility must be shared by all believers for their own generation. Every believer needs to become a missionary. They must accept their calling, be equipped, commissioned and supported.
2. **Going.** The task involves going. Jesus did not tell the disciples to open the doors of a building and hope that all people would come. It assumes believers will leave the comfort of where they are and go to where unbelievers are, just as Jesus left the 'comfort' of his Father's glory to become incarnate and give his life as a ransom for many.
3. **Proclaiming.** The task is proclaiming. We must not be forced into some typecast evangelical caricature when it comes to the matter of proclaiming the gospel. If we take the ministry of Jesus as our model, then our life, our deeds as well as our words must together be the proclamation. To be genuine, our gospel must stake an exclusive claim. This gospel must leave people with a choice. We can't preach the gospel without presenting the choice and we must not offer the choice without preaching the gospel.
4. **All people.** The scope of this task is all people. 'All people' means exactly what it says. We must take this seriously. It is the only way there will ever have a chance of it actually happening. It is an undeniable imperative of what Jesus consistently said and it is the only response worthy of his loving provision. It can only be done when believers take individual and collective responsibility for the 'ALL'. It is easy to be overwhelmed by this idea but the Biblical strategy is simple and clear. We need to start where we are and spread out to where everyone else is. Some time ago I counted up the number of people I am personally connected to in the five community spheres where I have involvement. I stopped counting at 400 and about 250 of them don't know Christ. So I can start right here. I need to work with my fellow believers in these spheres and seek God's grace for the way to go about it. When I meet with Christian people and Christian leaders in my city I am now asking them to share a commitment to complete the task. When I am with believers from other places I can ask them how we can encourage them to do the same and soon there is a genuine, sincere plan developing that could see the job done.¹⁶ The idea of 'ALL' presumes a plan and we need to discover this plan for every sphere.

¹⁶ In my own case I have 20 people in my domestic sphere, 48 people in my neighbourhood sphere, 80 people in my workplace sphere, and approx. 150 people in a community group I belong to and around 130 people in my extended family sphere. That means I have immediate access to over 400 people. Some of them are already believers and therefore qualify as part of the missionary team. A few more have experienced the ministry of the gospel but have not responded. The largest proportion is yet to experience the message of the gospel.

5. **Making Disciples.** We were told by Jesus to connect people to him as disciples, not just get them to pray a prayer. Since discipleship requires much more than can be delivered through a worship service or a Bible study, we have very often left people to self-disciple. Personal or small group mentoring has been set aside for larger collective gatherings facilitated by a few people with high skill levels. Such a program cannot produce disciples. Genuine disciple-making requires close relationships and life-sharing. It is something every sincere believer, with relatively moderate equipping, would be capable of. All that is needed is the commitment.

CONCLUSION: MATTERS OF THE HEART

This culture of ours always seems to be looking for a method, a program, a book, a CD or a seminar to provide our next focus. Postmodern society has conditioned us to see the next thing as being more promising than the current thing. The shelf life of a program is usually short. We are soon looking for the next one in much the same way as a drug addict looks for the next hit. The call of this paper is for a radical change of heart. If only we could read the words of the Great Commission without traditional religious overlays. We would feel the emptiness that is in us for the work it calls us to undertake. We may then begin to hunger for the indiscriminate redemptive love that Jesus had for people. We may understand the real reason we need oneness with the other believers in our community spheres. We may also see the need for the apostolic equipping that will produce the fullness of Christ; and we then may see passion and faith sufficient for the task.

Jesus told the first eleven potential church members, “As the Father has sent me even so I am sending you.”¹⁷ He did not commission a program, a method or a structure. He commissioned people. The kingdom of God does its first work within people. It transforms their hearts and continues until everything becomes new. A transformed person is the key to the proclamation of the gospel. Jesus also said that transformed people would work together to make his presence known and the gospel tangible to every person around them. This phenomenon would be called “the church”. He promised that this church would have power to smash the gates of hell and the keys that would enable the kingdom of God to come.¹⁸

The Primary Purpose is the one in which all the different activities and resources find their true meaning. It is the one that transcends differences and realizes the potential of all of the elements as they deliver heavenly grace to the places where it is intended and needed. It is only complete when the last person has had the chance to consider and accept or refuse – at least once.

I can remember standing in the Tower Restaurant, on Black Mountain in Canberra, some years ago with a hundred or so of my fellow believers. On a day when the fog that enshrouded the mountain began to lift, as we joined our hearts to worship God we looked on the spectacle of

¹⁷ John 20:21, English Standard Version. Crossway Wheaton Illinois.

¹⁸ Matthew 16.

120,000 plus homes where the residents of our city were rising to greet the new day. We repented that we had not taken responsibility for them as our God has called us to do. We made a pledge that we would come to them and live the good news in their presence as our Saviour had done in his own day.

It was a day when we touched something very holy. Our actions represented the holy heart of love of our Father and Creator. God still feels the same way but we have yet to fulfil that pledge. I suspect that it is the same where you are living. We must have our hearts transformed until we have his heart. Then we will have the courage and the wisdom to go and fulfil what God promised the people of our region, and what he has commissioned us and authorized us to do. We must not be satisfied with less.

WHAT PEOPLE HAVE SAID ABOUT 'THE PRIMARY PURPOSE'

"I thoroughly agree with Brian Medway's concerns expressed in his paper regarding the centrality and urgency of Christ's Great Commission. I sincerely hope that all followers of Christ, particularly those in key positions of each denomination and Christian organizations, would take up this concern. The Holy Spirit is calling all of us to a new obedience to our Lord's final command to share the gospel and make disciples of all nations."

Rev. Dr. Gordon Dicker,
Uniting Church in Australia, Theologian and Mentor

"I found this paper deeply challenging. It brought me back to basics. So often I am preoccupied with the 'good' rather than the 'best'. Everyone to whom I have shown it has had a similar response."

Rev. Dr. John Mallison OAM,
Author, Mentor and Equipper of Leaders Internationally

"This paper awakens the call of Christ to his church. As I travel the nation of Australia in evangelistic ministry I see the desperate need for the gospel to be proclaimed everywhere by every follower of Jesus."

Rev. Dan Armstrong,
Kairos Ministries, Wangi Wangi NSW

"In this paper, Brian has poignantly recaptured the heart of the gospel."

Dr. Robert I Holmes,
Storm Harvest Ministries, Cootamundra NSW

"We have been greatly stirred and encouraged by the clear message of "The Primary Purpose." Not only have we been using it to train people in our own congregation but the pastors in our area have been prayerfully seeking the way to get back to the basics of the gospel."

Pastor Graham Hore
Torrens Valley Christian Centre, Adelaide, SA
Executive Member, Crosslink Christian Network

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