

Called According to God's Purpose

Genesis 1:24-31, Psalm 8, Matthew 28:16-20

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One of the signs of the deterioration in the influence Christianity has in people's lives, including it may be said, in the lives of many professing Christians, is the lack of a sense of purpose and direction in life. In fact it seems to be clearest in the rejection of the idea that Christianity does in fact provide us with purpose and direction for life. I have heard it said, by more people than I care to count, that Christianity, as they experience it in the life of the church, seems to offer no sense of direction that they can adopt as their own. It would be an interesting exercise for us to sit back and consider what it is that people would actually hear us saying if they entered some of our Christian gatherings. What is the sense of purpose that brings us together? What is it that makes us what we are as Christians? Why do we even bother with our various activities? Is there a sense of purpose and direction to it all? Why is it that the churches are in many cases empty of whole generations? What has gone wrong?

Let's put aside for a moment the problem of a lack of a sense of purpose for our lives as Christians. There is, I believe, a bigger problem that affects more than just those in church. Let's take a wider view: what do we believe is the purpose for us as human beings? Do we still have in our society a consensus, a broad perception, as to what we are about as human beings? Why are we here? Why are any of us here, Christians or otherwise? Is there a purpose for our existence? Is there something we have to achieve in life that makes it all worthwhile, or is it a matter of being born, paying your taxes, and then dying? Can society offer more than that, or is what we are all about totally devoid of purpose? Do we have any sense of purpose for our society as a whole, let alone for each of us as individuals within it?

The loss of a sense of purpose in life is manifested in a variety of ways, all of which are often all too familiar for us. We have to consider the problem of youth suicide, drunkenness, self-destructive behaviour, vandalism, and other signs of alienation and disenchantment with life and with society. There is the rampant materialism that

surrounds us, in which we live to shop, to consume, to participate in the global economy by purchasing its products to keep the wheels turning. This can be seen in the rather extreme but still widespread perspective of a woman in America in response to the attacks on the World Trade Center, who said the only thing she could think of doing to help in that frightening situation was to go out and purchase some new furniture, to demonstrate that she was not intimidated by terrorism, and that she would do her bit to keep the economy going and growing. This attitude was repeated a few days later when George Bush commented that the immediate threat was over and that once again “America was open for business.” Is that all there is? Is that really all there is? If so, why do we bother? It shows a complete lack of a sense of human dignity and worth, a shallow and degraded perspective on who we are and why we are here, to proclaim such a simplistic and heartless approach to life.

But in the face of global consumerism, when confronted with keeping the wheels of the economy turning as the purpose and goal of life, is it any wonder that increasing numbers of people feel disenchanting and alienated? If you are struggling to survive and raise a family while contending with the constantly growing costs of living, then the promise of fulfilment offered by engaging in blatant consumerism is simply a source of disillusionment and resentment. But do we have anything to offer as an alternative? What can we as Christians say when faced with a lack of purpose and direction for life? Do we in fact have anything to offer?

I believe we do, first of all in the sense of purpose which we can offer as Christians, but more than that, we can offer a sense of purpose which pertains to us all as human beings. And the importance of that is that the purpose we have as human beings is primary, foundational, indispensable, to any purpose we have as Christians. For being a Christian is not something that is other than, separate from, or contrary to what we are about as human beings. Our Christian faith is in fact the fulfillment, the reality, the culmination, of what it means to be human. It is impossible to grasp truly what it means to be a Christian if we do not know what it means to be human. It has been said of Christians, and I know some of the people who gave rise to this saying, that “Christians are so heavenly minded they are of no earthly use.” The Authorised Version of the Bible uses the phrase “God’s peculiar people” to describe the special character of those God has called to be his own. Some seem to have taken this literally

and by extraordinary efforts have become as peculiar as possible. Christians are not meant to be like that! We are not supposed to be odd, eccentric, bizarre, downright whacky. Some Christians hold to views that make some of the worst of the New Age gurus sound positively sensible in comparison. That does not mean that Christians should be just like everyone else. No, we will, if truly following Christ, go against the grain of our society in many ways, and we may even be considered odd or eccentric when we do so. But this should be because Christians are truly sensible and down to earth, while the rest of the world is off on a bizarre tangent. There is nothing in Christianity that warrants us behaving in a whacky or peculiar manner.

So what is it that humans are all about? Why are they here? What is their purpose in life? Today we have read three passages from Scripture which bring together a number of different threads, which together provide for us a deep and profound understanding of what we are about as human beings, and what Christianity brings to that situation.

Let us then ask ourselves, what is the purpose given for human beings? The answer to that question can be found in the very way we ask the question itself. We do not ask ourselves whether or not there is a purpose for human beings. There is, undeniably, a purpose for human existence: it is deeply felt in all ages, in all civilizations, in every generation. There is a purpose there for us, and we need to find it and follow it. Without such a purpose, life is empty and hollow. So let's start with the assumption that there is indeed a purpose for us to find and follow.

Firstly, that purpose comes with being human, and we could in fact argue that having such a purpose is what actually makes us human rather than merely animals. It is that which distinguishes us from animals in the most profound and ultimate sense, in spite of all the other characteristics that we share with the animal kingdom. And thirdly, that purpose is given to us: it is not something we can generate or invent for ourselves. It comes from outside of us and is offered to us in such a way that we feel compelled to acknowledge it. If that were not so, then the lack of purpose in life would not bother us; we could quite happily live without any sense of purpose and direction and be completely and totally aimless. Now I am sure we can all think of people we know who do seem to live like that; but the point I am making is I think

confirmed when we consider that we see such people as somehow missing the point, as failing in some significant and substantial way to be truly fulfilled and completed as people. The lack of purpose and direction that leads to completely aimless living indicates fairly strongly that we cannot survive in such a way and be fully completed human beings.

The second major point I wish to make follows from the first, and that is that if we as humans are given a purpose from outside ourselves, which we are called to accept and follow in life, then there will be fairly serious consequences from rejecting that calling. If it is inherent in our nature as human beings to be called to fulfil a purpose determined for us by another, then to turn away from that purpose will require us to manufacture a substitute purpose of our own to cover up for the fact that we have rejected our true purpose in life. And this is what we see in the rampant consumerism we confront in every day life: this is a fake purpose for life foisted upon us and heavily promoted, not simply to encourage us to participate, but in an effort to suppress, to silence, to co-opt us for another vision of life, an alien purpose that does not sit well with who we are and who we are called to be.

The third major point follows on from the first two: if there really is a significant and genuine purpose which we are called to follow, then those who have recovered a sense of what that purpose is have a responsibility to communicate that to others who are caught up in the substitute purpose for life offered by those who are repudiating the genuine purpose.

This brings us then to our Scripture readings. Firstly, the purpose we have as human beings is spelled out clearly for us in Genesis 1:24-31. Here God states the purpose he intended for human beings. At the very point when they are called into existence, they are given with that existence, not added to it, not separate from it, but inherent in it, the purpose for their very being: to be the stewards of God's creation, to care for it, to tend it, to watch over it, to develop and explore it, to unfold all that it had to offer, and to use its richness and bountifulness for the benefit and wellbeing of other humans and all creation. It is a task to take charge, to supervise, to manage, to care for, to govern and direct all that God has created on this earth. And the arrangement that God has put in place is that the earth he made with all its creatures, should include among

those creatures the ones who should take charge of the earth on his behalf, and as his responsible and accountable stewards, manage it on a day to day basis.

This task of caring for and developing the earth in stewardly ways is, as I said, not additional to being human, not optional for us to adopt or ignore, but inherent in our very humanly being. We do not choose to be stewards of the earth: that is what we are, that is how we were put together; that is what we are here for. The issue for us to face is simply this: will we carry out this task in the way God intended, or will we exploit that position and use and abuse the rest of God's creatures (including the other creaturely stewards of the creation) for our own selfish advantage and benefit?

Our purpose in life, and the basis for all that we do, arises from this basic fact: God created us as stewards of his creation, with the responsibility to care for it, to nurture it, and to explore, examine, understand and develop it. That development is not for our own sakes or to sustain a consumerist lifestyle, not to exploit or plunder it, but to show by what we discover and develop from it, the richness, variety and grandeur of what God has made. We are to make something of the world God has entrusted to our care, so that in this way the creation will benefit from the resources enclosed within it. It is brimming with possibilities, and God has given us the task of exploring those possibilities to see what we can achieve with them so as to bring benefit to each other and to the other creatures we are to care for. The various tasks we fulfil in life all contribute to the corporate responsibility of all human beings to be stewards for God. We each have something of value to offer to this joint activity, no matter who we are or what our levels of skill or ability. Hence we can offer to everyone who asks, a deep and profound reason for living: to be a responsible steward of God's creation, charged with the task of caring for and developing it to the glory of God.

And here we can reflect on Psalm 8, which comments on the passage from Genesis 1. God has placed all things under the feet of those whom he created stewards of this world. The glory of the Lord is seen in all his works, from the moon and stars above, down to the animals, birds and fish that fill the earth and its waters. And the place of human beings in the creation is expressed very clearly: they are lower than the heavenly beings, but placed as rulers above all the other creatures of the earth. Human beings are rulers over all; not if they choose to be, not if they aspire to be, but they are

the rulers over all other creatures. It is not considered polite these days to make such claims, and it is considered to be arrogant or conceited to make such claims. We are to see other creatures as on a par with us, so we are told. We are not better than them, and we have no right to use them for our purposes the way we do. We may encounter extreme vegans who refuse to eat any animal products. But this concern for the other creatures of this world is, I believe, misplaced. That does not mean we should be without concern for animals, or exploit and mistreat them. But it does mean that in our position as rulers in creation, we are not on an equal footing with the animals, but placed above them. All things are placed under our feet, not for our benefit or privilege, not so they can be exploited, but so that we can properly exercise our task as managers of this earth on behalf of God, its owner. In comparison with the stars in space, we may feel insignificant and powerless; in relation to the rest of the creatures on this earth, we are the rulers and stewards of them all. This both keeps us humble in relation to the wider creation, which is beyond our reach and outside our task as stewards, but also confirms to us our proper place as responsible and responsive beings, made as God's image with the task of serving him as no other creature can do.

And so we come to Matthew 28. Here we have the so-called "Great Commission," which many Christians see as the focal point of their lives, namely that we should all be engaged in active evangelism, proclaiming the gospel to everyone. It is certainly true that we should make every effort to proclaim the gospel, as it is indeed the good news that this world longs to hear, even though many do not realise that it is in fact the answer for their deepest longings. We should endeavour to ensure everyone has an opportunity to learn what it is that God has done for us in Jesus Christ, and what he calls us to do in response. But I do not believe that this passage means that evangelism has the over-riding importance which many give to it. Nor do I believe that the kinds of evangelism that Christians often engage in, is actually what this passage is speaking about. The problem with much of our evangelism these days is that it does not represent the commission that Jesus gave to his disciples in this passage. Let's look at it a little more closely to see what I mean.

First of all, Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." A radical claim, which allows no disputes, nor can we beg to differ. All authority. Hardly a polite thing to say these days. Prime Minister, you have no authority save

that which Jesus as the supreme authority in heaven and in earth allows you to exercise. Parents, you have no authority over your children except that which Jesus, the supreme authority, grants you to use. Pastors, you have no authority in the church except that which Jesus, the supreme ruler of all things, permits you to exercise. Nobody has any authority in this world except that which derives from Jesus Christ, Lord of Lords and King of Kings. God the Father, Creator of all things, has given every form, every type, every kind, all degrees and expressions of authority in every manner whatsoever, solely to Jesus, and it is only from him that we have any authority to exercise in this world. That does not apply only to Christians; it is not limited to the church; it is not a purely “spiritual” authority that has no connection with everyday life. That is not what the passage says: “all authority” has been given to Jesus. That is to say, apart from the authority that Jesus allows you to have, there is no authority whatsoever in this earth. Where does the government get its authority from? From Jesus! Where do parents get authority from? Jesus! Where do school teachers get authority from? Jesus! Where do business managers, company directors, judges, accountants, the military, air traffic controllers, or public servants get their authority from? Jesus! Not just **Christian** managers, **Christian** judges, or **Christian** public servants. All these people whether or not they acknowledge and serve Jesus Christ, Lord of Lords, they all derive their authority solely from Jesus Christ to whom has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. And all those who exercise authority, no matter how great or small, will one day give account to that same Jesus for the way they have carried out their tasks. For it is his authority they exercise as stewards on his behalf, and the Gospel message must include the proclamation of the supremacy of Jesus in everything, and a call to responsibility in everything we do as his stewards.

“Therefore.” Whenever we meet a “therefore” in the Scriptures, we need to ask ourselves one simple question: what is the “therefore” there for? That which comes next is dependent on, inseparable from, inherently related to that which precedes it. “Go and make disciples of all nations.” What is a disciple? Someone who is prepared to accept the discipline of Jesus, namely to willingly accept the way of life that he commands for us, to believe and follow what he has taught us, to become like him through allowing his Holy Spirit to work in our lives to change us to become the people that God has called us to be.

Why should we make disciples from every nation? Because “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given” to Jesus, the Lord of Lords and supreme Judge. He is not Lord and Judge of Christians. He is not Lord and Judge of Westerners. He is Lord and Judge of all people in every place and country throughout the earth, whether or not they are prepared to acknowledge him and put away their fake, substitute gods. We are to proclaim Jesus as the one who rose from the dead and has been seated at the right hand of God with supreme power over everyone and everything. They are to be baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptism is a sign of death and separation from the old life through dying with Christ, and rising with him from death to a new life in accordance with his commands. We cannot preach a gospel which rationalises or legitimates or condones the old lives we lead. The Gospel of Jesus Christ demands that we leave these behind, and through being born anew through the Holy Spirit, to live as Jesus wishes us to live. Being a Christian does not mean simply adding active participation in church to your way of life. It does not mean adding faith in Jesus to your existing convictions and opinions, as one more viewpoint alongside the others. Jesus does not ask to be added to our existing lives: he asks to take over as Lord and Judge, and to renew us by his Spirit so that we henceforth live, think, believe, and behave entirely differently to before.

Believing in Jesus and following him is not an optional extra; it is not something we can take or leave depending on whether we wish to be “spiritual” or “religious,” or as one option among many in the spiritual smorgasbord we are presented with today. Jesus has taken the throne with all power and authority, and he does not brook any rivals! He does not make an offer of the gospel in the hope that some people may take him up on it. He is not in the spiritual marketplace peddling his version of spirituality in competition with others in the hope of pulling a bigger crowd. He makes what is in these days the unacceptable claim that where spiritual life is concerned, he has the only legitimate, brand-name, copyrighted product, and all others are illegitimate, unauthorised, spurious counterfeits. The New Testament is quite clear on this. Let’s listen to some sample passages on this theme:

God “raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all

things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” Ephesians 1:20-22.

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.” Philippians 2:9-11.

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible or invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.” Colossians 1:15-18.

“He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed.” 2 Thessalonians 1:8-10.

“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage, with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.” 2 Timothy 4:1-4.

This is what it means to proclaim the Gospel by “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded.” You cannot be a faithful Christian without obeying the commandments that Jesus gave. To be a Christian means to submit to his Lordship, to bow before His authority, to acknowledge his supremacy and priority in everything

that you do, so that our lives are lived solely in his service and for his glory. And only then can we follow on with the conclusion of the passage in Matthew: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” He will be with us and strengthen and guide us by his Spirit, if we acknowledge the supremacy of Jesus as the one who holds all authority of every kind whatsoever; and teach what he has commanded, not what we would prefer he had commanded; not what we have selected from among the things he has commanded; not what we have revised and updated from what he has commanded, but if we teach what Jesus himself has commanded us to teach.

We often hear people wondering why the Gospel does not produce more fruit and greater numbers in church. We find it hard to convince people that what Christians believe is credible and coherent. We wonder why what we try to say to the world around us does not have more effect, why it seems to be ignored or ridiculed. There are two things we need to consider: firstly, that the sinfulness of the human heart does not incline people to listen to and respond in faith to the Gospel; it is only as the Holy Spirit inclines their hearts to believe that they can repent and turn to Christ. Secondly, we need to consider the possibility that the message which we are proclaiming is not in fact the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but our watered down, simplified and therefore falsified version of that Gospel. If that is the case, and there is plenty of evidence that this is the cause of the problem in many instances, then it is no wonder it has no effect on the sinful hearts of our hearers. If we were to proclaim the Gospel that Jesus gave us to teach then no doubt we would have a message that would do two things: it would enrage and antagonise some who are hostile to the gospel, and it would bring joy and satisfaction to all those who repent and believe a message which is directed towards their true point of need: to regain their place as faithful and obedient stewards of God, submitting to the authority of Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and finding true fulfilment in carrying out the tasks for which they were created: to care for and nurture the earth, using the skills and abilities which God has given them, serving God and all their fellow creatures as he has intended us to do. Jesus is not simply Lord over Christians; not simply head of the church, but creator and ruler of all creation, who appointed us as his stewards to care for the earth that he has made. We have gone astray and sought to take charge of the earth as if it was our own to do with as we please, and in doing so have lost the sense of purpose and meaning which we can find only by being true to the calling God has given us. Jesus

came to this earth to live and die, and to rise again, not to enable us to go to heaven, but to renew us in our task as his obedient stewards. This calling, to repent and acknowledge him as Lord over all creation, is given not just to us but to everyone who will believe; with the promise of fearful judgement for those who continue in rebellion against the only true King.

Let us labour to recover the true meaning of the Gospel, and through bringing ourselves and others into subjection to Christ, find the meaning and purpose for our lives which God has given to us within our very beings. Through being true to ourselves as God made us, we will find peace and contentment, and a reason for living. Let us then live in every way to the glory of God as his faithful stewards, looking for the return of the King to take his rightful place as ruler over all creation.

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