

The Local Church

You are on this earth to continue the mission that Jesus left for you: “Go and make disciples of all nations.” But you can’t do that on your own, nor are you expected to. God tells us to work together with the Christians He has placed in our lives to bring His healing and transformation into the life of the world. His plan of redemption involves the church working in unity to reach the people around.

Inside the church, this means that we devote ourselves to the members of our church body. We have a responsibility to challenge one another, to love one another, and to serve one another in a variety of ways. When every member takes this seriously, it makes for a healthy church (Eph. 4:16). And when the church functions as God intended, the results are nothing short of miraculous. The church becomes a place of healing, a picture of how God wants humanity to live.

But this vision goes beyond the people within a church body. We don’t love and serve the Christians around us solely to maintain healthy churches. God’s plan is bigger than that. It involves reaching out to the whole world. His plan of redemption will not be completed if we are satisfied with those who are already on the inside. An inwardly focused church is an unhealthy church. It is a dying church. Biblically, a church that fails to look at the world around it is no church at all.

Jesus was clear about His purpose on earth: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Similarly, our calling is focused on reaching those who don’t know God:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 5:14–16)

Our focus is not inward. We live in the midst of a threatening environment, but we are more like a lighthouse than a bomb shelter. We are not called to hide from trouble but to guide others through it. We cannot fulfill our mission unless we serve one another in love, but living together in a tight-knit circle is not our ultimate goal. God has placed your church in the midst of a broader community so that He can spread His love, hope, and healing into the lives of the people around you.

Q1 Would you say that your church is more inwardly focused or outwardly focused? Why do you say that?

Known by Our Love

We know that we’re supposed to love one another. The two greatest commandments are to love God and love people (Mark 12:28–31). Love is basic to what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and it should be what motivates us to reach out to the world around us. The only reason that we can love anyone else is because God loved us first (1 John 4:19). We are transformed by love because “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5).

But what is the purpose of this love? Love should characterize the way we interact with one another. But why?

Because this is how the world will recognize us:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34–35)

Let's say you spent three years following Jesus closely and studying at His feet. That should make a difference in your life, right? Other people should be able to look at your life and notice a change. Something about you should signal your connection to Jesus. But the difference should not just be in our teaching or even in our pursuit of holiness. They should notice a love like they have never seen.

Jesus told His disciples that they should look different because of their love. Something about the way we love the people around us should signal to the world that we belong to Jesus. Our mission will include preaching, encouraging, rebuking, serving, studying, suffering, and many other things. But if all of these activities are not manifestations of love, then we have missed the point.

Q2 Read 1 Corinthians 13. Would you say that the life of your church is characterized by love? Why or why not?

Q3 What steps can you take to be an example of love in your church? Whether you are an official leader in your church or not, how can you lead others in being more loving?

A Compelling Community

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus prayed for His disciples. This was a pivotal moment for them, and Jesus prayed that they would be strengthened, focused, and protected. Interestingly, Jesus did not pray only for His disciples, but for "those who will believe in me through their word." In other words, Jesus prayed for us. Pay careful attention to what Jesus prayed on our behalf:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. (John 17:20–23)

Jesus prayed that we would be united. Why? So that the world would believe that Jesus was sent by God, and so that the world would know that God loves us. Isn't it amazing that Jesus believed that the unity of His church would communicate all of this to the world? So often we assume that having right and logical arguments will be enough, but Jesus said the world will be convinced by our unity. And when you think about it, haven't we all heard the objections from unbelievers who point to divisions in the church as a cause for their disbelief?

Notice that Jesus's prayer assumes that our life together as Christians won't be hidden from view. Our unity is something that the world will be able to see. Nowadays, church life can become so introverted and privatized that the world never sees the way we interact with one another. If all we ever do is gather in a private building on Sundays and perhaps meet in someone's home for a midweek Bible study, the world will never know whether we are united or not. If Jesus's desire for us is to be realized, we are going to have to stop hiding from the eyes of the unbelieving world. Jesus prayed for our unity, which means that we have to focus on loving and serving each other. But we need to be doing this in such a way that the world can see what we are doing and recognize it as a picture of unity.

Q4 Read John 17. Pay careful attention to Jesus's desire for His followers. Would you say that your church could be characterized by this kind of unity? Why or why not?

Q5 Take some time to think about your church and your unique cultural setting. What would it take for your church to be united, and for that unity to be displayed to the unbelieving world?

When was the last time someone asked you about your faith? Most of us would have to answer "never." Why do you think that is? The New Testament assumes that people will be able to look at the church, and that they will be struck by what they see. Listen to Peter's exhortation:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Pet. 3:13–16)

Peter was speaking about suffering when we haven't done anything to deserve it. What should happen when we suffer for doing good? We should honor Christ in our hearts, and we should be ready to explain our hope. Peter assumed that we are going to suffer unjustly, and that when we do, we are going to respond with so much hope and joy that people will ask us what is going on. And when that happens, we should be ready to proclaim the gospel.

But it doesn't happen like that for most churches. There isn't anything compelling about the way we live together. Our love isn't very noticeable. Our unity is either nonexistent or hidden behind the doors of the fellowship hall. When we suffer, it's usually because we've done something wrong. In the rare event that we experience suffering that we didn't earn, we respond by complaining.

In other words, we don't give anyone a reason to ask about what makes us unique, so nobody asks. Yet we still feel the need to evangelize. So we end up coming across like salespeople peddling a product that didn't really work for us. We should all pray for the courage to tell others about Jesus, but we also should be working toward the love and unity that makes the church attractive. Let's not place our hope in clever sales tactics. Let's not give up on Jesus's strategy of reaching people simply because it feels impossible at times. Jesus's strategy was the life of the

church. We must stick with His plan and pray that supernatural love begins to characterize our churches.

Jesus said that the world would recognize us by our love and unity. Peter said that people would be compelled by our hope. But are love, unity, and hope the words that unbelievers use when describing your church?

Q6 Do you ever feel like a salesperson when sharing your faith? What steps can you take to change this?

Q7 What would it mean for your church to live as a compelling community—a group of people who demonstrate love, unity, and hope in such a way that the unbelieving world is compelled to find out what is going on?

A Kingdom of Priests

As you will see in the sessions on the Old Testament, God made a covenant with Moses and Israel. As God spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai, He explained how Israel would relate to Him and what it would mean for Him to live in their midst. Israel's calling and identity were clear: "You shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5–6). Though all the earth belongs to God, Israel belonged to God in a special way—they were His people. They were a holy nation, a group of people set apart for God's purposes. And they were a kingdom of priests. A priest represented the people to God—interceding on their behalf—and represented God to the people—mediating His truth, commands, and grace into their lives. Israel stood collectively as a kingdom made up of priests. They stood amid all the nations of the earth in a priestly role, ready to represent the nations to God and God to the nations.

When you study the New Testament, you will see that the church is given this same vocation. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). In God's plan of redemption, the church is called to be and to do what Israel failed to be and to do. The purpose of the church is to work together to reach out to the world around us. We have been called out of darkness into His marvelous light so that we can proclaim God's excellencies to a watching world.

Q 8 Read 1 Peter 2:4–12. How should Peter's description of our calling as the church affect the way we think about and interact with our surrounding community?

Your Church Matters

We are called to make disciples, and strengthening the other members of the church body is an important part of this. But if we are not working together to help the unbelieving world around us become followers of Jesus, then we are missing the point of our salvation. God blessed Abraham so that He could bless the world through him (see Gen. 12). If your church is not actively blessing the surrounding community, then you are ignoring God's mission. We can never forget that we

have a role to play in God's plan of redemption. You should feel honored to know that God has a plan for your church in particular.

Though God's church is meant to cover the globe, there is no church aside from the local church. God has placed you in your unique setting, alongside a unique group of Christians, for the purpose of proclaiming Him to the unbelieving world around you. The way you interact with these people matters. It doesn't matter whether your church is thousands strong or if you meet with two other Christians in a living room. It doesn't matter if your church was formed yesterday or one hundred years ago. But the way your church functions does matter. Your church is essential to God's ongoing plan of redemption. Remember that God left His church to fulfill His mission, and He didn't leave a backup plan. If your church does not pursue God's mission, then your community misses out on being exposed to the hope that God offers them in the gospel. Too many churches miss out on the vibrant life Jesus wants us to experience as we pursue His mission together.

The life of your church is a matter of life and death. God tells us how the story will end, but you have an essential role to play nonetheless. Will you help your church step up, look at the community around you with the compassion of Jesus, and call them into the plan of redemption that has transformed your church body? There's a reason God has you in this church at this point in history. You can help your church become an attractive community that exhibits Christ's love, unity, and hope.

Q9 Spend some time in prayer. God's calling for your church is too important to neglect, and it's too important to take on without the power of the Spirit. Ask God to so fill the life of your church with His Spirit that your community notices a difference. Ask Him to equip you for the role He has called you to play in His plan of redemption.