

Visionary Elders

Detailed Outline *Part 1 of 3*

Introduction

What would be your reply if someone were to ask, “What is the purpose of your local church?” or “What is its vocation?” Typical responses might be defensive, evasive, or pensive. Hardly ever do we get a confident response.

Now the question is, “Is it even important to be able to answer that question?” or “Is having a definable purpose necessarily even biblical?” In the final analysis the question before us is, “Do we do church because that is the way it has been, or is there a purpose?”

In a May 2005 survey of American pastors and ministers conducted by George Barna, the book *The Purpose-Driven Church* was voted as the second book most influential on their lives and ministries, behind *The Purpose-Driven Life*, a subsequent book by Rick Warren (Wikipedia).

This message, I want to clarify, is not about the book. It is to probe the biblical basis and benefits of verbalizing the purpose of the local church.

We will ask ourselves these two pertinent questions:

- Does the Bible provide a purpose for a local church?
- How does defining the purpose help a local church?

I. Definition

Before we proceed it is important that we understand what we mean by vocation or purpose.

You will find the dictionary defines vocation as “summons,” “a strong inclination,” “a divine call.” And purpose is defined as “an end to be attained.”

Whichever word we might choose to use, we recognize that the answer to this question will help many people take church seriously.

II. What is the Christian approach?

Does the Bible provide us with answers? Let's take a look.

A. Historical responses

The reason for a local church has been offered by many well-meaning Christians through the centuries.

1. *“The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs.”*
– C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*
2. Some say that the purpose of the local church is to cover the “three E’s”—the exaltation of God, the edification of the believer, and the evangelization of the lost.

3. Some wish to keep it simple by quoting John 4:23: “True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.”

The list goes on, and as we look at these answers we realize that none are necessarily wrong, and yet none are adequate.

B. Biblical support

What are some of the purpose verses?

1. Worship God (John 4:23)
2. Study His Word (Col. 3:16)
3. Encourage one another (Heb. 3:13, 10:25)
4. Help one another (Gal. 6:2)
5. Participate in the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19–20)
6. Evangelize (Eph. 4:12)

This list is in no way exhaustive. However, what these verses do is uncover the many roles the local church plays.

So how do we crystallize these into something that is easy for all to understand?

C. Example of Jesus

A question may be asked, “Why did Jesus come to this world?” We can wax eloquent and theologically uptight, but hear the words of our Lord Jesus Christ as he gives a very clear reason to Pilate in John 18:

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” (John 18:37 ESV, emphasis added)

We also read that when it was time for the purpose to be accomplished, Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem.

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51)

D. Our takeaway

So what lessons can we glean from this section?

In looking at these verses, it is obvious that the local church has a purpose. And following the example of its leader, the Lord Jesus Christ, we understand that it should be clear.

III. The Experience of Our Local Church

I want to share with you our experience.

When we first met together as a church we did a series from the book of Acts. The intent was to establish the core fundamentals on how we intended to function as a local church.

We took for ourselves Acts 2:42 as a guiding verse because it provided the perfect picture of a New Testament church, and because this verse is probably the closest purpose statement we could find for a local church.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42)

A. We covered the four areas as ABCD. We called it the ABCD's of our local church:

1. Apostles' Doctrine
2. Breaking of Bread
3. Communion or Fellowship
4. Devotion to Prayer

B. How did this help us?

1. Clarity of thought

Everybody knew what we were about, both within the church and those who heard about us. When we had visitors or when new members wanted to join, the clarity of purpose was evident.

True, we made some mistakes and had some misunderstandings. It was only the grace of God that kept us going, but there was no misunderstanding on why we were there.

2. Commitment to work

The clarity of thought led to working together for the common purpose. We were able to frequently call "all hands on deck" without confusion.

Our outreach ministries, the website, the Sunday school, the special events, were all (without being overtly directive) focused on accomplishing the purpose.

There was a climate of purpose that engulfed us that sought to glorify God.

3. Consistency of approach

Even after all these years when we introduce a new ministry or wish to host an event, we can still hear people go back to the original purpose.

Each year we choose a theme for the year—this year it is "Growing Together." All of our themes were based on fulfilling the purpose, staying centered on why God has placed us in that community.

We have since grown, and our needs have both changed and increased. And we find ourselves coming back to wait on the Lord often as we revisit and remind ourselves of our purpose.

4. No written purpose statement

You may have noticed we didn't get down to writing a "purpose statement." While that might be important, it is more important that the purpose is both communicated adequately and worked on collectively.

The awareness of the common purpose, which was higher than our own personal aspirations helped us to stay focussed.

IV. Benefits of an Identified Purpose

The Bible doesn't mandate that we need to have identified our purpose, but it certainly affirms the benefits of having one.

So what is it? How does it help to have an identified purpose?

A. Lack of confusion

1. You may have noticed there are various churches who model themselves as:

- a) Seeker-friendly
- b) Experiencing the Holy Spirit
- c) A community church
- d) A teaching church, etc.

It is not my place to judge and to criticize the rightness or wrongness of their purpose.

2. However, it is amply evident that if the purpose of that community of faith is not communicated then it may experience any one of these situations:

- a) It will try to please every member's wish rather than God's will.
- b) It will pick up the flavor of the most dominant group.
- c) It is unable to focus its attention on the most important issue at hand, since it will be pulled in different directions.
- d) The main purpose of church rarely remains the main reason over time.

B. Power of written communication

In talking about the benefits, let us look at the power or benefits of written communication.

It is interesting that there are over 80 instances of the phrase "It is written" in the Bible, and that is without taking the variations of the phrase into consideration.

- 1. When Jesus was tempted, our Lord retorted with "*It is written . . .*"
- 2. When faced with recurring issue, Paul writes to the churches. For example,

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. (Phil. 3:1)

3. When Paul wanted to communicate something important or intimate he would write it down himself, instead of having a scribe write it for him.

"I, Paul, write this with my own hand." (Philem. 19)

The written word is powerful.

Some churches write down their purpose and keep in a highly visible area, but then again, it is up to the local church to decide how they communicate and collaborate on fulfilling their purpose.

Conclusion

So what do we do in the final analysis?

A well-communicated and collaborated purpose has the support of both biblical examples and practical benefits for any local church.

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Detailed Outline Part 2 of 3

Introduction

Ask any child what he or she wants to be when grown up, and invariably they have an answer—and often a noble one at that. Every child has a dream; that is how we are designed. It is not much later that life happens, and these visions of greatness disappear like mist on a hot sunny day.

This fading of a dream is unfortunately one of the fallouts of our fallenness. Thankfully, though, in Jesus Christ we can once again dream, hope, and believe in a bright future.

So let us talk about the future. In this part we will talk about the biblical basis of visioning, and how visioning can help a local church stay focused on the Lord.

V. What is a “Vision”?

Not sure if you noticed, but the term “vision” is an oxymoron. What do I mean by that?

Vision, generally speaking, is about the ability to see things; and yet we use this term now to discuss things that are *not* seen—“an image of the future.”

A. Definition

If we were to answer the question, “What is vision?” it would be “An ability to define the unseen future.”

In the context of the local church, therefore, vision is a mental image of the future, and I strongly believe it is an image as prompted by God.

Because vision deals with the future, at the very least, it provides hope, trust, and confidence.

1. Hope in God’s plans (Jer. 29:11)
2. Trust in God’s leading (Prov. 3:5)
3. Confidence in his ability (2 Tim. 1:12; 1 Thess. 5: 24)

B. Clarifying misunderstanding

1. Misquoted verse
 - a) Probably the most misquoted Bible reference to indicate the need for a vision is:
“Where [there is] no vision, the people perish . . .” (Prov. 29:18 KJV)
 - b) This verse has nothing to do with the vision of the future. It becomes apparent as we read the rest of the verse. It refers to the Word of God and its life-giving revelation.
 - c) In fact, if we are looking for support verses for the concept of visioning, we will be disappointed. There is no one explicit verse that supports the need for vision casting.

2. Misunderstood word

- a) It is important that we do not confuse a *dream* or *visions* that we read about in the Bible with *visioning*. The first is a revelation, a prophecy, or a divine sign; and the second is about the image of the future.
- b) The idea here is not to confuse a homonym with a synonym. They are two words that spell and sound the same, but have two different meanings.

3. Dream vs. Vision

- a) While on this topic it is important to differentiate between a dream and a vision. This again is not about the biblical references as in Joel or Acts 2.
- b) This is about the dream of the future that some people talk about. In this context then, "Vision is a dream on wheels."
- c) What that means, is that vision is a verb. It is about taking action to make the dream a reality.
- d) We read in John 4 Jesus talking to his disciples:
"Lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!"
(John 4:35b NKJV)
- e) It is implied that as a result of looking up and seeing the fields there is a requirement for action. Therefore, the passage goes on to say:
"... The one who reaps draws a wage ..." (v. 36)
- f) Another example is where the story doesn't end with Pharaoh's dreams being interpreted by Joseph. There was work to be done for the "vision" of the storehouses filled with grains to come true. Action had to be taken.

C. Examples from the Bible

We saw that vision as a picture of the future. Now there are examples in the Bible to help us understand this concept better.

1. Paul

But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." (Acts 9:15–16 ESV emphasis added)

- a) This is the passage where God tells Ananias to go the street called straight and meet Saul. And in response to Ananias' doubt, the Lord tells Ananias, "*I will show Saul ...*"
- b) Later in Philippians we read that Paul, after all those years, has not lost his passion toward that call.

I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.
(Phil. 3:14 KJV)

2. Lord Jesus Christ

- a) Our Lord while on earth had a “vision” of the future, if you may. We read about this in the context of His suffering in the cross:

Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of [our] faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross. (Heb. 12:2)

- b) There is something about the image of a future that is enabling.
- c) Vision both energizes and enables the person.

VI. Elements of a Vision

Let's probe further by looking at the elements of a vision.

A. It is God-directed.

1. We need to be careful in discerning this as true.
2. First, this is not about extrabiblical visions, visitations, or dreams that people have said they have had. That's a dangerous trend. In fact, most cults have sprung up on the premise of some exclusive “vision.” That is not what is in discussion here.
3. Second, we must be amply clear that God speaks to us now through his Word and that he will never “reveal” anything that is contrary to his Word.
4. Meditating on the Word of God, understanding and waiting on him, is the first element of visioning.

B. It is founded on prayer.

1. Prayer matters. Prayer is what hinges the vision.
2. Notice this verse in Mathew, which asks us to pray to the Lord of the Harvest:
Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest. (Matt. 9:38)
3. Lord of the harvest: One must realize it is Jesus who is saying these words. He is asking that we pray to the Father, who is the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth laborers into the harvest field. Jesus could have made that possible without having to ask, yet we are told to pray.
4. First missionary journey: In another instance, we read in Acts 13 that the first missionary journey was birthed as a result of prayer.
5. Lord Jesus Christ: In fact, Jesus while on this earth commenced every aspect of his ministry in prayer.
6. Prayer must always remain the important prefix to any work or activity.
7. Prayer is fundamental both in recognizing what God wants us to do, and in acknowledging our total inability to do it without his help.

VII. Experience of My Local Church

A. Our experience

1. When we started to meet as a church some years ago, we were renting a church basement. The place was adequate but not convenient. People found it difficult to find us; we couldn't put signs up because of city regulations.
2. Our location became a hindrance for growth.
3. Our prayer was that we could move to a convenient place, at a reasonable cost. As leaders we were already meeting once a week to pray, and now we got the church involved in two ways:
 - a) Committed prayer that God would lead us to another place, and
 - b) To meet to verbalize what it is that we were looking for.
4. As a result of those meetings, we came away with a simple prayer or vision as we called it: "Be a visible church."
5. You may have already gathered from the phrase that it was a play on words.
6. True, we did not want to remain burrowed in the basement, but at the same time we also wanted this new place that God is preparing for us, to be a place where our Lord Jesus Christ would be visible to that community.
7. People were galvanized in prayer, and everyone in the church knew what answered prayer would look like.
8. In about one year God opened up a place for us in the most miraculous way.

B. What were our specific lessons on vision casting?

1. Having verbalized our vision, we were able to thank God specifically for answered prayers.
2. God is the initiator, motivator, and accomplisher of the vision.
3. The vision came from God; it was laid in our hearts; he gave us the opportunity to pray for the vision; and when the vision was accomplished, we were able to glorify his name for answered prayers.

VIII. Application

A. Here are a few pointers on visioning:

1. Visioning is merely a picture of the future that God lays in our hearts.
2. As we depend on him in Word and in prayer, we will see him work in our midst by making it a reality.
3. Visioning moves us away from our limitations and firmly places it on God himself.
4. We acknowledge without his help we can do nothing.

5. Visioning helps us to recognize answered prayers.

B. How do I apply this as an elder?

1. Ask yourself these questions:

- a) As an elder do I have an image of what my local church will look in five years?
- b) Can I commit to pray fervently for it to come true?
- c) Can I commit to work as unto the Lord in fulfilling the vision?

If you have answered yes to these questions, I think you have given your consent to working on a vision. Now commit to do this together with the members in your church.

2. Beyond Vision

God is good in that He gave us the gift of dreaming and yet His promise offers something beyond our wildest imaginations or ability to envision. We read in Ephesians:

“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us.” (Eph. 3:20)

For those of us who “expect great things from God; attempt great things for God,” God is saying we can never out-vision him.

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Detailed Outline Part 3 of 3

Introduction

In this third part of this message we want to look at core values or principles. Core values are about establishing your “non-negotiables,” things that will not be compromised whatever the cost.

There are many administrative benefits of establishing core values. This part of the message is a quick look to see the biblical basis and benefits of identifiable principles within a local church.

Illustration: One of the best examples of core values comes to us from the US Army. They are: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. These are drilled into the heart of every cadet, through example, emphasis, and experience. So much so that whether the soldier is on the job or off, he or she knows that the seven core army values are what being a soldier is all about.

IX. Definition

Principles are the belief system that frames the conduct of the individual or organization.

- A. We behave and react based on our belief system.
- B. Broadly speaking, there are two belief systems: the world’s view and the biblical view.
- C. However, when we talk about core values/principles we look at specifics as applicable to the individual church.

X. Purpose

What is the purpose of core values for a local church?

A. Core values define character.

- 1. We saw that core values dictate behavior. However, we need to remember that behavior projects character.
- 2. For example, we may preach love from the pulpit, but it is the day-to-day demonstration of love that establishes the character of the church.
- 3. Core Values → Behavior → Character
- 4. There is a direct connection between the character our behavior exhibits and the core values it upholds.

B. Core values rank order importance.

- 1. Operationally, rank-ordering helps to identify the most important aspect for the local church.
- 2. Rank-ordering puts the most important values at the top and the lesser ones at the bottom.

3. Jesus rank-ordered two core values and we read about it in Mathew 22:36–40.
 - a) Love God with all your heart, soul and mind, and
 - b) Love your neighbor as yourself.
4. The second can never take precedence over the first. That is to say, loving my neighbor as myself must never precede loving my God. If it does, there is a decay in the quality of love.

C. Core values eliminate ambiguity.

1. Core values are set in stone. This prevents the temptation to alter behaviour to suit the circumstance or comfort.
2. Here is an extreme example, and this may be applicable to some countries:
 - a) If integrity is a core value then the committee for the church building project will not seek to bribe a city official to speed up the approval process.
 - b) There's no discussion whether we should or not because we understand the core value.

XI. Benefits

So how do core values benefit a local church?

A. Maximizing limited resources

1. Resources are almost always limited, be it time, money, or people.
2. Example of finances; most finance committees will work to allocate funds based on urgency. The wheel that squeaks most gets the oil.
3. While it is true that there will always be some allocation based on what is urgent, the better basis for allocating funds would be based on what is important or needed most.
4. Core beliefs provide what is important for the local church.
5. As an example, we set apart a good amount of money—not just a small percentage—for missions in our budget.

B. Staying focused

1. Life happens, and as the church adds activities, ministries, and events, the core values will help it to stay focused.
2. Churches that wish to identify their core values will often do an exercise or some form thereof, of what we will call “We Are, When We Exercise”:

“We will know we are (add the value) when we (add activity/event/program/ministry).
3. As an example, we recently in our church discussed what we need to be learning during our mid-week meetings. Our discussions ranged from making it popular to even providing practical studies such as finances etc. This is what we arrived at:

“We will know we are a Bible-teaching church when we learn the Bible together.”
4. As a result, we are now doing the New Testament survey with a Bible reading for the

whole church for each week day, with daily questions to be answered, followed by an interactive session of sharing and learning when we meet for Bible study.

XII. The Experience at Our Church

A. Our personal experience

- B. We do not have a formally written down set of core values. However, we consistently modeled our behavior in ways that established what was most important to us.**
- C. As we grew, these helped us to navigate some tricky and some less tricky situations.**

Here are couple of examples:

1. Outreach on Sunday mornings:

- a) I don't wish to sound legalistic here, but I wish to share the principle. We are involved with a local group that does door-to-door evangelism and outreaches at various parades. The parades usually happen on Saturday; however, there were times when they have fallen on Sunday mornings.
- b) Our core values helped us decide that meeting around the Lord's Table was more important than evangelism. Now it might sound strange to some that this is even a discussion. They would say Sunday morning is exclusively set apart for remembrance, forgetting there are those on the other end of the spectrum who will argue, "What better way to worship than to have somebody know Christ?"
- c) Now this may not be how your church sees it, but for us we knew where we stood, and every member was clear about "our core values," so the decision was easy.

2. Sunday school events:

- a) When we started meeting as a church we did not have many children for our Sunday school. However, we recognized this ministry to be extremely important, particularly because of its impact on the lives of these children.
- b) We scheduled annual events and activities in a scale that was larger than our current need. We began inviting kids from the community, kids of friends and colleagues, any who would be interested. We even budgeted a substantial amount of money to promote and fund these activities.
- c) Many children come out for the events, and the gospel was shared. This we continue, though we have not been able to get them to start coming to Sunday school. It may seem like a wasted effort and expense, yet we continue because it is a core value.

XIII. Conclusion

A. What is our takeaway?

- 1. Simply said, establishing core values will make the administering of the local church, including fund allocation, decision making, etc. easier.

2. It sends a clear message on who and what is its most important aspect of your church.
3. It distills the doctrines into practical issues that can be understood and followed by every member.

B. Illustration

1. In conclusion, I am reminded of Charlie Brown. In the cartoon he is explaining to Lucy the scientific details of why kites fly. Lucy listens to him waxing eloquent on the technical explanation about kites and praises his knowledge—and then asks Charlie Brown why his kite is down in the sewer.
2. Often we are sound in our Bible teaching and for good reason, though we are unable to convert it into practical terms that can be lived out.

C. Core values are tools that help with the conversion from knowledge to action.