

Introduction

When the Bible talks about the church—the People of God—it uses a variety of exciting and dynamic images. We are the Bride yearning for our wedding day and beautifying ourselves for it. We are a thriving, bustling city of people drawn from every race and walk of life. We are the active body, directed and controlled by Jesus Christ our head. We are the pilgrim people of God, being led across the desert to the promised land. We are the army of the Lord, wielding the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. We are the light on a hill, shining the hope of salvation to a lost world.

But ask an impartial observer to come up with a metaphor for what he observes in most churches today, and we would get a very different set of images: we are fossils, hidden away in our museum-piece buildings. We are tortoises who move so slowly because we are inherently conservative and resistant to change. We are a spluttering candle that gives little light to anyone on anything. We are a cosy club, dedicated to the preservation of our curious rituals, outdated music, archaic buildings and stubborn and unreactive structures.

To greater or lesser degrees, many churches have fallen into the trap of accepting and perpetuating their own ‘evangelical’ traditions and failed to remain dynamic, active and open to change for the Gospel’s sake. The result has been painfully obvious. A great decline in the those involved in church, and many congregations that have, for whatever reason, simply lost the plot.

In recent years, we have been bombarded with prescriptions for shaking our churches out of this deadly spiral. We have been encouraged to adopt new styles of worship, new cell or small-group structures, alternative leadership patterns or to adopt the principles of business re-engineering. While there is value in many of these approaches and techniques, they are ultimately doomed to failure if they do not spring from the nature of the Gospel truths which we are both saved by and serve.

This book is an attempt at being truly ‘radical’ about our understanding of church. Our aim has been to go back to our roots—the Gospel—and see what kind of community it should create.

The principles this book explores are, therefore, an attempt to ‘nail-down’ what a gospel-centred church should look like in practice.

By ‘gospel-centred church’ we mean more than simply a group of people that engages in evangelism. We mean a church in which the whole of its life and activities are shaped by the content and imperatives of the gospel.

We want to identify certain key features of such a church so that it is possible to measure the extent to which we are being faithful to our Master and His message. They are principles that can be worked out in a range of situations and they are as applicable to those in a traditional or established church as they are to those involved in a new venture.

These principles are not confined to those involved in ‘professional’ ministry. They are, rather, an attempt at creating the outlines of a *gospel culture* for the whole church. Because of this they should not be seen as the final word on the matter, or an exhaustive list.

It is our hope that this workbook will be used prayerfully by individuals, groups, church councils, elderships and study groups with the aim that we start to think more biblically and seriously about how we can make our congregations more clearly gospel centred. It is only by this practical obedience to the Word of God, which leaves behind the traditions of men, that we can build healthy churches in our land.

Nor are these principles a prescription for results. Sorry to say, they do not come with a guarantee that converts will roll off the production line, nor from our own wonderful experiences of success. Gospel ministry is hard work and gospel success is often difficult to measure. That is because conversion is the work of God. It is only the Spirit of Life who can give life. This is a great truth and as the people of God we should glory in it.

But does that let us off the hook? Does this mean that our work

cannot be assessed? Certainly not. We should assess what we are doing. We should ask hard questions of one another's ministry. But we must make sure they are the right questions...

Steve Timmis and Tim Chester,
May 2002

Finding your way around



Consider this

A scenario – often based on a real life situation—which raises some kind of dilemma or frustration in gospel ministry.



Biblical background

A relevant Bible passage together with some questions to help you think it through.



Read all about it

A discussion of the principle, both in terms of its theological underpinning and its contemporary application.



Questions for discussion

Questions that can be used for group discussion or personal reflection.



Ideas for action

Some ideas or an exercise to help people think through the application of the principle to their own situation.

We have tried to make this book work:

- ★ whether it is read by an individual or used as the basis for group discussion
- ★ whether you want to work through it systematically or turn to particular topics as they arise in church life

PART ONE

the •
priority
• of •
mission

1

Mission at the centre

Principle

Mission is the central purpose of the church in the world.



Consider this

The PCC of St Bartholomew's are meeting on a cold November night. Or maybe it is the quarterly church meeting of Springfield Evangelical Free Church. What is going to be on the agenda tonight? There will be an update from the pastoral committee, the treasurer's report, a discussion on the refurbishment of the ladies' loo, and who should speak at the church weekend. But the big item is the discussion on whether to buy a new songbook. No doubt these are all matters that need the attention of someone in the church. But is this what church is really about? What should be the focus of our attention when we make our plans?



Biblical background

Read Acts 1:6-11

- ★ why did Jesus leave the disciples when he ascended into heaven?
- ★ where does mission begin and where does it end according to v. 8?
- ★ what is the purpose of the Holy Spirit according to v. 8?
- ★ what is the link between the ascension of Jesus and the mission he gives to us (see Matthew 28:18-20)?



Read all about it

This first principle of gospel ministry hardly needs any explanation or defence: 'mission is the central purpose of the church in the world.' Mission—telling others the good

news of Jesus—is Christ’s command to his church. Acts 1 reminds us that Jesus left his followers on earth to continue what he had begun, equipping them by the Spirit to be his witnesses. Mission reflects the love of God and it is the only hope of a world ruined by sin and facing God’s eternal judgment. Above all, God is glorified as Christ is proclaimed and people submit to him.

And a vision for mission must be a vision for the nations. God’s purpose is to gather men and women from every nation. The gospel is for the world. We are the losers if we deprive ourselves of the excitement of what God is doing around the world and resulting richness of Christian experience.

Who will argue that mission is not the purpose of the church? As Emil Brunner famously said, ‘The church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning.’

The problem is the gap between our rhetoric and the reality of our practice. A friend of mine, who was converted in his twenties, looked forward with great eagerness to his first church meeting. This was when the church would plot the downfall of Satan. Or so he assumed. The reality was a big disappointment. The time was spent discussing which type of paper to buy in for the toilets.

Someone was telling me recently about the difficulties she faced as Brit fitting into American culture. One of her struggles was with people who said, ‘Let’s do lunch’. She expected them to phone and arrange a date—they never did. ‘Let’s do lunch’ was just an idiomatic way of saying farewell. It carried all the conviction of a Brit saying ‘How are you?’. We all say, ‘Let’s do mission,’ but does it carry any more intent than, ‘Let’s do lunch’?

The key word in this principle is ‘central’ whereas we have made mission ‘peripheral’. For most of us, and most of our churches, mission is one thing we do among others. And so, for example, we have a mission team alongside a pastoral team, a home-group team, a team that deals with the building, a youth team and a music team.

People are beginning to say we need ‘missionary theology’ rather than a ‘theology of mission’. Mission can no longer be looked at as

one branch of theology. All theology must be missionary in its orientation.

We need the same reorientation as churches. We are in a missionary situation (as indeed we always have been). So all that we do must be missionary. That does not mean the only thing a church should do is proclaim the gospel to unbelievers. But it does mean your teaching, training, prayer, pastoral care, youth work, praise and so on must all contribute to the mission of the church.

There is great rejoicing in heaven over every sinner who is brought back to God. And we have all tasted something of that joy when we have known people converted. Of course mission involves disappointment and sacrifice. But there is no greater excitement than seeing Christ glorified before our eyes as men and women submit to him. What else is worth putting at the centre of your life?



Questions for discussion

- ★ describe the missionary situation in which you are placed
- ★ what does it mean for mission to be the priority in church life?
- ★ what do you think is the most important reason for giving priority to mission?
- ★ is your church focused on mission or maintenance?
- ★ what might it mean in practice to make 'your teaching, training, prayer, pastoral care, youth work, praise ... contribute to the mission of the church'?



Ideas for action

Imagine you are part of a church planting team in, say, Spain. Discuss your answers to the following questions with someone else, perhaps with your home group, and

write down your answers.

- ★ what criteria would you use to decide where to live?
- ★ how would you approach secular employment?
- ★ what standard of living would you expect as pioneer missionaries?
- ★ what would you spend your time doing?
- ★ what opportunities would you be looking for?
- ★ what would your prayers be like?
- ★ what would you be trying to do with your new friends?
- ★ what kind of team would you want around you?
- ★ how would you conduct your meetings together?

We find it easier to be radical in our thinking when we transplant ourselves outside our current situation, but you are as much a missionary here and now as you would be were you part of that team in Spain. Mission is the central purpose for us wherever we are. Check whether your answers describe your life now.

In his book, *Mission Minded* [Matthias Media/The Good Book Company, 1992], Peter Bolt encourages churches to draw a grid with the activities of the church down one side and across the top different stages in the process of preparing for mission, raising awareness, sharing the gospel and follow-up. This allows churches to check how each activity contributes to mission and to look for the gaps.