

Why We Exist

Upon This Rock, Part 3

Matthew 5:13-16

After years of effort, one mega online organization has now digitized 30 million books.

According to one author, this body of data has literally created a new field of cultural studies called culturomics; they're able to track the use of words and analyze cultural trends and changes and shifts in thinking, reflected in the books that are written and the words that are used.

The data reaches all the way back to 1800, and it now reveals what mattered . . . what was popular . . . what was ignored – all made plain as paper by the appearances and uses of words.

For instance, the words “ice cream” appeared and took off in 1910, just after GE introduced the amazing electric powered home icebox. It is otherwise known as the refrigerator. Suddenly, the words “ice cream” found their way into novels, books and encyclopedias.

This same data saw a connection between the publication of the Adkins diet and the sudden drop in the appearance of the word pasta. That was a sad day, wasn't it?ⁱ

One of the most interesting observations about who we are as a western world is the steady decline of any reference to God. The name or word – God – has been in steady decline for decades and is now used only about one-third as much in American publications as it was in the early 1800's.

The reference to God in literature is simply disappearing.

Other research organizations are telling a different – yet connected story. The church at large is effectively disappearing right along with God.

According to a recent Lifeway Research study, over the next seven years, 55,000 churches in the United States will close their doors (of all denominations).ⁱⁱ

Imagine, 151 churches will go out of business and close their doors this coming week.

Is that because we are no longer needed? Or is it because the church no longer knows why it exists.

Another research is revealing that it is primarily the mainline liberal protestant churches and Catholic churches that are losing thousands of attendees annually while the evangelical church is growing or at least holding steady.

However, according to one study, only 1% of all of the churches in America are actually growing by reaching lost people – only 1% are reaching lost people; which means that most church growth is really not growth at all; one author wrote, it's really nothing more than the shuffling of existing Christians from one church to another.ⁱⁱⁱ

If there was ever a time for the church and the Christian to return to a biblical understanding of our mission, it's today.

And for the past few weeks, we've been exploring these core issues: **who we are, why we belong . . . and for today, why we exist.**

In other words, why didn't God whisk us to heaven as soon as we were saved? Why'd He leave us here?

I'm going to answer that by making five statements and by taking you to two passages of scripture.

And the first statement is this.

1. We exist as exhibits of spiritual reality

Turn to Acts chapter 1. Jesus announces to his disciples in verse 8, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.

You shall be my witnesses – locally, regionally, nationally, and globally.

By the way, this isn't so much about what they will do, but who they will become.

Jesus didn't outline a plan – He promised a Person – the Person of the Holy Spirit who would inhabit them and every other New Testament believer after them.

And He will empower them to enter the courtroom of public opinion – in the workplace, in the gymnasium, in the neighborhood – where they will be witnesses – living exhibit A's to the resurrection power and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There has never been a better time for the Christian to return to this original principle. You are not a computer technician; you are not a housewife; you are not a doctor or a lawyer or a mechanic or a painter or a secretary or a teacher.

That is what you do.

What you are, is a witness – called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to take the stand, in the courtroom of your influence, and testify to the spiritual reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Look, there is not one verse in the New Testament that tells an unbeliever to go to church; there are plenty that tell the church to go to them.

And if they are not being reached – if only 1% of the church in America is seeing individuals come to faith in Christ, could it be that the church isn't really all that concerned about the implications of the gospel?

Does the church really believe that mankind is eternally lost without Christ? And does that bother us?

Jesus saw the wandering masses of people and was *moved with compassion (Matthew chapter 9; chapter 14; and chapter 18)*.

He rode into Jerusalem on that donkey and everyone's cheering, and we tend to overlook the fact that Jesus was weeping over their unbelief (*Luke 19:41*).

How much do *we* care?

Charles Spurgeon, the great pastor of the 1800's, once wrote that every unbeliever ought to go to hell with our arms wrapped around their legs. As if to say, we will do anything we can to keep them out.

Here are the questions the church should be asking itself?

- Do we believe the gospel? That it's heaven or hell?
- Are we relying on the power of the gospel rather than our own methods?
- Are we getting the gospel right?
- Are we getting the gospel out?
- Are we praying for the work of the gospel?
- Are we training the next generation in the gospel?^{iv}

These are the kinds of questions you ask of the church you want to join with because it is our mission to be living exhibitors of the saving power of the gospel.

2. Secondly, we exist to expose sinful corruption

In other words, we can't deliver the gospel without exposing the issue of sin.

Turn to Matthew chapter 5.

The Lord has informed us that we are witnesses – we exist to testify to the spiritual reality of Christ and the gospel; now notice *verse 13*. Jesus is speaking to His disciples, and he says, *You are the salt of the earth; if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything . . .*

In other words, salt that isn't salty isn't capable of performing its created purpose.

When you hear the idea of salt, you immediately think of food. But in Christ's day, salt had some functions.

For one, it served as currency. Roman soldiers were often paid in salt, which they could sell at a profit. We have an expression that goes all the way back to Rome when we say that someone isn't worth his salt. In other words, he doesn't deserve his paycheck.

To the Romans, salt represented purity. The Gentiles would often offer salt as an offering to their gods. It's shimmering white appearance created all kinds of superstitions – in fact, the Greeks called salt, "theion" for divinity.

And of course, salt flavored food.

But it also deterred corruption and decay in foods that were kept for any length of time. It served as a preservative, inhibiting decay.

In a very real sense, Christians inhibit and deter the decay of culture. Their presence exposes sinful corruption and serves like salt does in a wound – making a painful ordeal out of it.

It's interesting that the Bible never said Christians were sugar – but salt.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't be sweet – there are plenty of verses for graciousness and kindness and compassion . . . but we exist for this purpose as well.

Our very presence to a decaying culture is like salt in a wound.

Our presence – our existence – our lifestyle literally exposes the sinful corruption of our world.

3. Thirdly, we exist to expel satanic darkness.

Notice further in this text at *verse 14*. ***You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket.***

Children sing the song, this little light of mine – I'm going to let it shine.

It's about time we started living that ourselves.

Oh, but you say, culture's growing darker . . . absolutely – and what better time for salt and light to exist!

When God planted the very first New Testament church, the human body was idolized along with a pantheon of gods. The athletes in the Olympic Games competed completely naked so that the entire body could be observed and glorified.

The Roman culture at large mocked heterosexuality as prudish – bisexuality was normative.

The Romans emperor, Nero had both married several women in succession along with a man, without any apparent public reaction.

Child prostitution proliferated during the first century, and drugs and pornography were rampant and legal.

We have a letter dated one year before the birth of Christ from Hilarian to his wife where he writes, "If you have our child while I am away, and it is a boy, let it live. If it is a girl, expose it, let it die.

Seneca, one of Nero's court advisors, wrote these words that revealed just how little human life meant during the days of the early church; he wrote, "We slaughter a fierce ox. We strangle a mad dog, and the child who is born weakly and deformed, we drown."

And this was the time when God effectively said, "Now is the perfect time to create the church."

To sprinkle the earth with people from every tongue, tribe and nation who will exist to expose sinful corruption and by the shedding of their light, expel the darkness from the lives and hearts of those who believe.

What a perfect time to reveal to our world that there's a way to be rescued from the darkness and brought into the kingdom of light.

Peter would motivate us all to, "***proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called us out of darkness and into a marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).***

Paul reminded the Corinthians that they had received . . . ***the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6)***

Paul described the Ephesians believers as ***those who were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (Ephesians 5:8).***

And the Romans Christians were challenged to ***put on the armor of light (Romans 13:2).***

This is why we exist . . . Jesus says here, ***you are the light of the world.***

The word for ***world*** here is cosmos which refers to the world system.

And we know that Satan is the chief ruler over a fallen demonic hierarchy of, Paul writes to the Ephesians – an organized system of ***rulers, powers and world forces of this darkness (Ephesians 6:12).***

So you are the light in the midst of a world system under the influence of Satan, and our world systems are wandering around in the darkness of sin and is lost and entirely confused and self-deceived.

It was ironic to me that Time Magazine had a recent edition where its front cover was literally plastered with question marks; question marks all over the cover. The headline at the top of the cover read, Is Monogamy Over? The byline read, "And 21 other questions about the way we live now."

The questions had to do with everything from public nudity being a personal right to offensive art being allowed to exist to polygamy being accepted . . . authors weighed in on both sides.

But the one question that stood out to me was the one on the cover down near the bottom that read, What will we regret?^v

Can I answer that? Everything!

Listen, the darker the world system, the more necessary and the more distinctive and dramatic and different and disliked your light will be!

Culture's response to your light will be like shining a flashlight in someone's face, and their response will be, "Turn that light off!"

Oh, culture is so dark . . . our country is so lost. What is the church to do?

Well for one thing – stop crying in your soup. There is no better time to be the light than today.

And God is as much on the throne today as he was in first century Rome!

Yes, Satan is loose . . . but he's on a leash . . . and a sovereign God holds that leash in His hand.

Secondly, the church does not need freedom to be faithful . . . and fruitful – talk to our brothers and sisters in China where evangelical believers are estimated to outnumber communist party, members.

The church doesn't need approval from its culture to receive the approval of God.

And a church is way off the mark when it seeks the approval of man.

But just as in Rome, let's not play down the darkness; beloved, the issues of our generation are far greater than any political system can solve; the issues of our generation are deeper than any false religion can address.

We need nothing less than an awakening by means of the Spirit of God that reforms the church first and foremost and as the church stops living like unbelieving man and stops pursuing the same things as unbelieving man and stops seeking to fit into the world system of man and gain the approval of man – and we will become what salt and light were meant to be and . . . perhaps God will so choose to deter some of the decay and dispel some of the darkness and bring about another reformation.

And to this end we pray . . . and this is why we exist.

- To exhibit spiritual reality
- To expose sinful corruption
- To expel satanic darkness

4. Here's another – number 4: To expand the glorious reputation of God.

Notice *verse 16 of Matthew 5* – the end of that paragraph – *Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.*

What are you shining to your world? Your good works.

You know what good works include? It includes working so well – and doing such a good job at your work – that people around you, CEO's, secretaries and supervisor's look at what you've done and say, "Wow . . . that's really good."

Good work is work that is good.

So what kind of worker are you?

What a profound and simple way to impact your world for Christ.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

That means the way you write that term paper; the way you take care of your lawn and your house; the way you write that report; the way you give the lesson; the way you grill that hamburger at Cook Out – and I come over every week and get in line because you do such good work.

Whatever you do – how you dress, how you talk, how you invest – whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

And your "good work" builds a bridge of credibility over which you carry the gospel of God's glory to others . . . and when they find out the reason you're so good and dedicated and diligent and honest and pure and wholesome and kind, and you explain that it's because you're really not working for them – you're really not doing it for them – you are doing it for your Father in Heaven, they may very well be interested in hearing about your Father.

Whatever your task – whatever your vocation – whatever you put your hand to do – that is sacred duty as unto God.

The individual members of the church must resurrect the 500 year old Reformation doctrine of *vocatio* – which gives us our word *vocation*. Not *vacation*, *vocation*. *Vocatio* literally means sacred calling.

Martin Luther, the converted Romans Catholic monk wrote that "All our work in the field, in the garden, in the city, in the home, in government – these are the masks of God, behind which he is hidden and does all things."^{vi}

He even wrote, and I quote – “God Himself is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaid.”^{vii}

Paul told the Colossian believers that very thing, **“Do your work heartily, as unto the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive your reward . . . it is the Lord Christ whom you serve.” (Colossians 3:23-24)**

In other words, you literally demonstrate the glory of God in your diligence at work.

Good works also expand to doing things for others that are simply good.

This carries the idea of the exiled Jew bringing shalom – or peace – or goodness – to the city of Babylon.

Babylon of all places was to experience the goodness of Jewish labor and interest and honesty and integrity.

The prophet Jeremiah told the Jewish exiles to seek the peace of prosperity of the city of Babylon and to pray to the Lord for it (*Jeremiah 29:7*). In that paragraph you discover they are told to **build houses, grown gardens, have families.**

Now it wasn’t simply to plant trees and grow gardens because Babylon needed shade and Babylonians liked fresh vegetables.

No; in fact, the Jewish people are also told that Babylon is going to be destroyed, and they are looking forward to that too (*Jeremiah 50 and 51*).

Shalom was more than building good houses and planting good gardens and raising a family. Bringing shalom – peace – to Babylon had as its core purpose the fact that God’s people were bringing into a fallen culture a faithful presence of integrity and diligence and purity.^{viii}

People around you see how you live and see how you take care of your things and see how you manage your money and see how you prioritize your time, and they can tell that you’re different.

One author wrote that these Jews in Babylon were to live – and we also today – as God’s people, placed in our culture and yet reflecting in our daily practices our distinct identity as believers in Christ.^{ix}

Let me say the same thing a little differently – and this is number 5.

5. We exist to exemplify spiritual passion and purpose.

And here’s the principle in the form of a question. What is it about your life and mine that

under observation, someone would be able to tell we’re living for different reasons than the rest of the world?

In other words, that something different is more compelling to us and interesting to us than what the world offers.

And it is related to the fact that we exist as individual Christian and as a member of the local Body of Christ for the glory of God.

Do you find the gospel compelling enough to share?

Harnack, the German church historian, wrote that the early church advanced so dramatically because every member believed they were informal missionaries.^x

We call them today, tentmakers . . . market place ministers.

I love that vocabulary.

And I think we need to change the way we talk and think, once again.

In our last discussion, I proposed that we needed to change our terminology so that we didn’t refer to ourselves as **members** of the church but **owners**.

Now keep in mind, Christ is the ultimate owner of the church – He said in *Matthew 16:18, I will build my church.*

However, He gave us to one another, and we belong to a local church, and the effectiveness of the local church will depend on its members having an owner’s mentality.

This isn’t just a church or that church; this is your church.

We need to shift from attenders or even members to owners.

I think we need to make another change. We don’t need to think of ourselves as members but tent makers.

The term comes out of the Apostle Paul’s personal experience – he supported himself by stitching together tents and selling them in order to support himself so that he could not only pay the bills but travel and carry on the work of the gospel (*Acts 18*).

So the term *tent maker* became a term for people who leave their home culture and move to some foreign culture where they take their skills in engineering or teaching or printing or computer technology and they get a job; but their job is really only a means to pay their bills – their purpose for being in that job is to use it as an entry point where they can influence people with the gospel of Christ.

The problem with our typical church thinking is that we forget we are tent makers can live right here too.

You don't have to go to China to become a *tent maker*. God has given you a job – and you aren't living for *it* – it just pays the bills . . . but it's the entry point that allows you to tell people what kind of life is really worth living.

Beloved, this is why we exist:

- **To exhibit spiritual reality**

- **To expose sinful corruption**
- **To expel satanic darkness**
- **To expand the glorious reputation of God.**
- **To exemplify spiritual passion and purpose**

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/4/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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i Christian Rudder, Who We Are When We Think No One's Looking (Crown Publishers, 2014).

ii J.D. Greer, Gaining by Losing (Zondervan, 2015), p. 27

iii Adapted from Greer, p. 27

iv Questions adapted from Kevin DeYoung & Ted Kluck, Why We Love the Church (Moody Publishers, 2009), 33

v Time Magazine, September, 21, 2015

vi Gene Edward Veith, The Doctrine of Vocation (Modern Reformation, May/June, 1999)

vii Ibid

viii Adapted from Kevin DeYoung & Greg Gilbert, What Is the Mission of the Church? (Crossway, 2011), p. 202

ix Ibid, p. 202

x James Montgomery Boice, Romans: Volume 4 (Baker Books, 1995), p. 1875