

The Great Ends of the Church

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Mission Statements

Scripture

2 Corinthians 5:14–21 The church does not live for itself, but for Christ.

Prayer

Holy God: you have chosen us to serve you, and appointed us the agents of your love. We thank you for prophets who recall us to your will. We are grateful for every impulse to confess and correct wrongs, to keep faith pure and purposes faithful. We praise you for your Holy Spirit always reforming the church, so we may better serve as disciples of your Son, Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.¹

Introduction

Mission statements—every organization seems to have one. Grocery chains, oil producers, pharmaceutical companies, and social networking services all devise pithy statements designed to communicate their noble purpose and efficient service. Christian congregations are no exception. We regularly adopt brief mission statements describing who we are, communicating a vibrant vision of faith and action. Our congregational self-descriptions are usually abstract idealizations, possibly intended more in hope than as actual depiction. Perhaps that is why they are so easily forgotten.

For more than a half century, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has embedded a brief mission statement in its *Book of Order*. An inventory of the great ends of the church, first articulated in 1910 by one of the PC(USA)'s predecessor denominations—the United Presbyterian Church of North America—was incorporated into the denominational unions of 1958 and 1983.

1. *The Worshipbook* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 161. Used with permission.

The great ends of the church are:

the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children
of God;
the maintenance of divine worship;
the preservation of the truth;
the promotion of social righteousness; and
the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.²

The great ends of the church is not a typical mission statement. Instead of setting out an idealized description of who we are, it challenges us by telling us who *we are to be*. With an economy of words and a surplus of meaning, these six great purposes of the church's life compose a genuine Presbyterian mission statement. They set before us six foundational works of the church that express who and what the church is called to be and how the church is called to act. They are not included in the *Book of Order* as taken-for-granted assumptions about ourselves, but as the calling of each congregation, every presbytery, and the whole General Assembly and all its agencies. Why, then, do congregations, presbyteries, and the General Assembly spend so much time and effort on disconnected, manufactured, and constantly revised visions, mission statements, and goals?

Everything Grows Together

The great ends of the church is not a list of disconnected items, but a holistic vision of the church's life. The church cannot be faithful to the intention of the great ends by emphasizing some while neglecting others. These basic purposes of the church do not allow us to stress proclamation of the gospel while neglecting nurture within the congregation, or to promote social righteousness while failing to guard the truth of Christian doctrine. The great purposes of the church are intimately related to one another; none can be fully understood apart from its relation to each of the others and to the whole.

Yet too many congregations and denominations regularly fall into the practice of limiting their efforts by emphasizing social engagement to the neglect of faithful worship, for example, or stressing doctrine at the expense of joyful proclamation. Lopsided

2. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order 2013–2015* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2013), F-1.0304.

priorities are rarely intentional. More often than not, we fall into constricted patterns of church life without noticing what we have lost. We may play to our real or imagined strengths rather than face weaknesses honestly. We may allow some useful structures or successful programs to crowd out other aspects of faithful church life. We simply may become content with the way things are, thereby missing a vision of the way things could and should be. The great ends of the church offers a needed corrective, a comprehensive check-up that provides us with a faithful way to examine our life together.

The interconnectedness of the church's six foundational purposes becomes evident in an intriguing way when they are paired from the inside out.

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- “Maintenance of divine worship” *and* “preservation of the truth.” There is no separation between devotion and integrity, drama and doctrine, beauty and truth. Worship that neglects the truth of the gospel—no matter how engaging, creative, and inspiring it may be—does not maintain the worship of God. Truth without praise and prayer is not the truth about God. The great ends of the church display their unity.
- “Shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God” *and* “promotion of social righteousness.” There should be no tension between the internal life and outward mission of the church. Focus on the inner life of a congregation or denomination without active engagement in the quest for social justice leads to self-seeking introversion, while focus on social action apart from attention to the internal life of the faith community leads to centrifugal exhaustion. The great ends of the church display their unity.
- “Proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind” *and* “exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.” Senseless debates about verbal evangelism versus the witness of our lives are put aside when their mutuality becomes evident in the comprehensive design of the great ends. Speaking the gospel is oddly abstract without the witness of Christian life; the witness of Christian life without the gospel narrative is vague and ambiguous. The great ends of the church display their unity.

Bulletins and Banners?

The great ends of the church presents us with a unified vision of the church's purpose, and each of the six aims presents us with a sharp challenge concerning the ways we shape church life. Why, then, are the great ends so often ignored in favor of fabricated congregational and denominational mission statements? Why, when the great ends are used, are they routinely relegated to customary words in Sunday bulletins or artistic symbols on decorative banners? Presbyterians tend to be legalists about *Book of Order* rules and regulations, but the *Book of Order's* more

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theological and ethical affirmations are treated as window dressing, ecclesial ornaments admired and then disregarded.

There are multiple causes for our neglect of these six fundamental purposes of the church's life. Underlying all of them, however, may be their pointed specificity, both individually and as a whole.

- “Proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind” has no room for glib, generalized references to the gospel. This great end specifies that the gospel of Christ's life, death, and resurrection is good news about the *salvation of humankind*. Furthermore, we are challenged to *proclaim* this gospel, not merely to believe it.
- “Shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God” goes beyond comfortable congregational life to encompass *all* of God's children. Some need shelter from the *dangers* of violence or unemployment, most need nurture *in the faith*, and all need fellowship *in the Spirit* far beyond Sunday coffee hours.
- “Maintenance of divine worship” takes us beyond debates over worship styles—“traditional” or “contemporary”—to the realization that worship is not about us, but about our praise of the one God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and our obedience to God's Word.
- “Preservation of the truth” means we are not at liberty to believe whatever we wish to believe, but the truth about God and ourselves must be taught, believed, lived, and sustained.

- “Promotion of social righteousness” makes clear that engaging God’s justice in both church and society is not an optional feature of Christian faith and life, much less an unwelcome intrusion into “spiritual” religion.
- “Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world” compels us to examine the character of our individual and corporate Christian life. When the world looks at us, what does it see? Does what it sees reflect God’s new Way in the world, or does it simply mirror the way things already are in the world?

None of this is easy. It is more comfortable for some people, congregations, and even denominations to avoid one or more of these six challenges because they do not conform to existing convictions or preferences. “Promotion of social righteousness” may be dismissed as meddling in politics. “Proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind” may be scorned as fundamentalism that fails to recognize the value of other faiths. We may find comfort in being satisfied with the existing shape of congregational worship or small-group fellowship, and so have no need for bothersome self-examination.

The Great Challenges to the Church

The great ends of the church present us with pointed challenges to our routine ways of thinking about the church’s life, about its faith and its mission. They call us to bold declaration of the gospel, deep spiritual lives, reformed worship, fidelity to the truth, justice in the church and the world, and visible witness to Christ in our personal and ecclesial lives. The great ends also present us with challenging paths toward these purposes:

exhibit!
 promote!
 preserve!
 maintain!
 shelter and nurture!
 proclaim!

The great ends spur us to action. They do not ask us to contemplate the nobility of their aims, but to commit ourselves to move toward their fulfillment.

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No congregation is perfect or will ever be beyond reproach. No denomination is flawless, and all denominations live in perpetual deficiency. Our inevitable failure to achieve the church's great purposes should not discourage us from striving toward the faithful goals set before us, however. The six great ends are both the horizon toward which we are called to travel and directional signs along the way. They are a road map as well as a destination. They are gifts to us from our forebears, the result of their best thinking about the shape of the new life to which Christ calls us. They come to us as encouragements to our faithful living, not as indictments of our grand and petty failures.

The church's six purposes challenge us, setting out touchstones, beckoning us toward deeper love of God and neighbor. For that reason, they must never become standards we employ to critique others. If we use them to evaluate other congregations or to pass judgment on our denomination, we pervert their intent. Viewing others with contempt, saying, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people" (Luke 18:11), is as self-deceiving as it is censorious. The great ends of the church are the unified purposes for all Presbyterian congregations, every presbytery, and all national structures. However, while the whole church is called to fulfill these purposes, their challenge begins with us, where we are. Diverting their light away from us and toward others only succeeds in leaving us in darkness.

Church studies sometimes proceed in an atmosphere of detachment as the "subject" of the study is observed from a distance. As we continue this study of the great ends of the church, we will move beyond detachment to engagement. We may then be able to let these central purposes examine us, helping us discover how they can become aids to the continuing reformation of our church. They call us to renewed ecclesial and personal faithfulness. Our purpose in this study is not merely to learn *about* these central purposes of the church's life, but to understand how to use them as lenses that show us more clearly the realities of our church's life and the possibilities for its ongoing renewal.

Spiritual Practice

On six successive days, meditate for five minutes on the Scripture passage suggested for each of the great ends of the church:

1) proclamation of the gospel: Romans 10:14; 2) shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship: Acts 4:32–35; 3) worship: Psalm 150; 4) truth: John 1:14; 5) righteousness: Amos 5:24; 6) kingdom of heaven: Luke 13:18–19.

Questions for Reflection

If the great ends of the church are familiar to you, how did you learn about them? How were they used? If they are new to you, why do you think you haven't heard about them before?

Which of the six great purposes of the church most challenges you?
Your congregation?

Would the great ends of the church be a suitable mission statement for your congregation? For the PC(USA)?