

So, What's the Point?

Micah 6:6-8, Matt. 28:16-20

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Have you ever been in a group of friends, and someone tells a joke, and everyone else is laughing, but you didn't get the point? Sometimes, we try to cover that up and just laugh. Sometimes, if the others in the group are good friends and we feel safer, we may go ahead and admit that we just don't get it, we just didn't get the point.

But this business of not getting the point has other ramifications than jokes. Sometimes our Christian life can get very confusing, because we lose sight of the point.

For example, what is the point of your being here this morning?

For some of you, this is one of the most important things for you to do all week. Your week just doesn't go the same if you were not here.

Some of you come because you are worn out and have been dragged down and put upon and here you expect to hear an encouraging word to hang in there, to keep on keeping on, to make sense of your world, and to gather the strength to make it through another week.

Others come because they just love to sing those great old hymns of the church and some of the newer ones as well.

Others come from habit.

Others come to see their friends.

Two men in my second church came to please their mothers.

When we think of all the things that your church does, what's the point?

Is there some central organizing principle that puts all of these things you do at church into a harmonious whole?

What is that essential reason?

We in the Reformed Tradition are likely to hearken back to John Knox's answer to that when he said in the 1560 Scots' Confession that the "notes of the true Kirk" are three:

1. True preaching of the Word of God,
2. Right administration of the sacraments, and

3. Ecclesiastical discipline, uprightly administered.

When those three elements were present, you had a true church.
Missing any one of those three, you did not have a true church.

128 years later, in 1688, the Westminster Confession of Faith said that the reason for the church to exist was to gather and perfect the saints. That was not radically different from the “Notes of the True Kirk.” The saints gather for the preaching and the sacraments, and the perfecting of the saints resulted from its discipline.

May I remind you that we live today in a radically different context than did our 1560 and 1688 ancestors. They lived in Christendom, or a church culture. Their presenting challenge was how to do church correctly. Their strategy was to preach, administer the sacraments, and discipline correctly. Everyone was already a Christian, presumably. They sought to make them better Christians.

Our context today is different and has been since the 1960's. We do not today live in Christendom. We live in a more unchurched culture than in any time in our lifetimes.

So, what's the essential reason for the church to exist today?
What is the church of Jesus Christ supposed to be doing in Hampton Roads in the next 5 to 10 years?

George Hunter, a former professor of Louisville Theological Seminary delivered a speech decades ago that complained that most of what we have written about the purpose of the church has been too focused on input, and not enough on output. Too much on process, and not enough on product. Too much on means, and not enough on ends. Too much on members and not enough on those who are not members.

He gave as his central illustration the metaphor of a shoe factory. It is not enough, he said, for the shoe factory to hire workers, have a pleasant and a safe working environment, and the finest up to date computerized machinery.

In order for a shoe factory to be a shoe factory, it has to eventually produce some shoes.

Proclamation of the word,
administration of the sacraments,

ecclesiastical discipline,
gathering and perfecting the saints,
are all valid and worthwhile activities.

But in a sense, they are all involved with input and not output,
all involved in means, and not an end,
all involved in process and not a product.

They are not the essential reason for the church to exist.
They all point to something else beyond themselves.

They are not, by themselves, the results, the shoes, so to speak.

So, what then is the essential reason for the church to exist?

I believe that the answer lies in the passage from Mathew 28.

Over the years, these words have become known as the Great Commission.
Not the **only** commission from Jesus.

But the Great Commission.

It is my contention that making disciples is the Great Commission,
not because these were Jesus' last words to his church.

After all, he had different last words to the church in the other three gospels.

Mark: none.

Luke: "Stay in the city and wait."

John: to the eleven: "Come and have some breakfast." to Peter: "Follow me."

But his last words to the eleven in Matthew to make disciples has stood the test of time
because it is the most inclusive and the most indispensable of the commissions.

Unless the church is in the business of making disciples,
we will not be able to do any of the other commissions,
such as feed the hungry,
take care of the orphans and widows and sick and prisoners and naked, to gather and
to perfect the saints.

Our reformed ancestors of the 16 and 17th centuries sought to reform the church by
going back to its Biblical roots.

I wonder if we have not made the mistake of holding on too tightly to their strategies,
fashioned for a 16th and 17th century culture.

Our unchurched society today is more like the church of the first 300 years than of any time since then.

Why do you think that Paul established churches around the Mediterranean basin? Was it just to have churches? Or was it to establish disciple making factories?

Why do you think that St. Columba, taking the gospel from Ireland to Scotland in 563, established churches throughout pagan Scotland? Was it to have churches? Or was it to establish disciple making factories?

If you agree with me, that making disciples **IS** the great Commission, is the central reason for the church to exist, then how is that worked out here at the Denbigh Presbyterian Church?

Look at **worship**.

We should be designing and implementing our **worship** services so that people who have never been to a church worship service before in their lives will find people waiting in the parking lot to help them find a parking place and point them toward the front door, find someone else outside the front door waiting to greet them and to help them find the nursery and the worship space, find a worship bulletin that is easy to read without unnecessary religious jargon and assumptions that unchurched people know what the Lord's Prayer and Apostle's Creed are. The worship experience itself should be designed with excellence in mind, whether it is contemporary or traditional. The worship experience should be designed to speak God's Word to the mind, to the soul, and to the will. Hopefully it will engage all five senses, and maybe even the sixth sense as well. Our worship services should allow the worshipers to hear the good news of the gospel in such a way that not only will they be moved, but that they will be touched in such a way that they want to have their lives changed and reoriented to follow the Lord Jesus Christ instead of the ways of the world. In short, our worship services yes should be pleasing to God, but they should also have a hand in making disciples of Jesus Christ.

What about your **educational ministry**? Is it designed so that we know more facts about the Bible and church history and theology? Or is it a process by which people have the opportunity to flesh out in concrete detail what changes are needed in their lives as they seek to become more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ?

What about **caring for our own members** when they are in need? Our members should be cared for in their hour of need. But they should also know that that help is coming not out of personal friendship, but through the Spirit of the living God. Touched by the reality of Christ's presence, they will seek to replicate that love to others when they get on their feet again. Because that's what disciples of Christ do.

We should design and implement our **ministry to the community** so that, as a result of the needy being helped, they may be able to identify your help as being help sent straight from the heart of God, so that they will themselves want to become disciples of Jesus Christ. That help needs to happen in a context in which the helpers know the names of those helped. We are fond of saying that the Christian faith is more caught than taught. That catching happens when you are in personal relationships with people, not just handing our food and blankets or putting up a basketball goal on your parking lot.

We should design and implement our **membership recruitment ministry** so that prospective members are asked to identify the gifts for ministry that God has given them so that from day one, they can see how they can become involved in participating in the ministry of the church as disciples of Jesus Christ.

We should design and implement our **stewardship ministry** so that people are asked to return a tithe because disciples need to give, more than the church needs to receive, and to see their financial resources as a gift from God, to be used as a disciple of Jesus Christ would.

We should design and implement our **property ministries** not to build and maintain something for ourselves or according to our tastes, but to be inviting to those outside our fellowship. Do people coming to your church have an impression of how highly do you value your church by the upkeep and maintenance of the facility? That's a silly question. Of course they do. The question is better put, what message are you conveying about the value you place on your church by its upkeep and maintenance?

Finally, we should design and implement a **staffing pattern** and to call people who have a heart and skills not only of making disciples, but also of leading others to make disciples for Jesus Christ.

Years ago, I led a Bible study on this passage. When we talked about making disciples, every person in that room started talking about how they as individuals should be doing more in the area of evangelism. I was glad to hear of their sincere and well grounded motivation to do something in response to this text.

But what saddened me a bit was that they missed what I think is a significant truth.

That is they were all talking about what they should be doing as individuals.

But look again at this text. Jesus gave this commission to 11 people. Those eleven were the nucleus of the church. They were not given this marching order as eleven individuals, but as the first small group ministry.

Personal, one on one, witnessing is not a gift that the majority of Christians have.

But God has abundantly blessed the church with an oversupply of spiritual gifts for ministry, which taken together and blended into a wonderful recipe, makes the congregation itself a witnessing community, one that can make, and has made, disciples of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus challenged Peter and Andrew to become fishers of people, remember that they used nets instead of fishing poles. They went after schools of fish rather than individual fish. Congregational evangelism, with all eight of the functions of the church concentrating on making disciples, is actually much more effective as an evangelism tool than one-on-one fishing for individuals.

If the activity in which you are involved in the church is not making disciples, then you have, it seems to me, two choices.

One, the preferable option, is to figure out how it can be changed or modified to make disciples.

The second option, if the first option does not make disciples, is to shut it down.

We today are simply too busy to waste time in a church activity that is not making disciples.

This report has been more in the category of troubling the comfortable, than comforting the troubled.

But there is also good news here in this challenge.

The good news is that you are not left alone to do all of these “shoulds” by yourself.

Not only do you have the company of your fellow church members, not only do you have the help of your Presbytery, but even more importantly, you have Jesus Christ with you, guiding you, pushing you, supporting you, giving you new ideas to try out.

“Remember,” he concludes, “I am with you always, even to the close of the age.”

As you strive to make everything that you do at your church to end up producing some shoes, making some disciples, be comfortable knowing that you are on the right track.

And that you are not alone in your disciple making.

Jesus Christ is right there with you every step of the way.

And isn't that what we really want?

A sense of not only being close to Jesus,

but working right along side of him,

joining him in his work of making disciples.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.