

The Aim, Action, and Attribute of the Church¹

Said Alice to the Cheshire cat: “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” Said the cat: “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.” “I don’t much care where...,” said Alice. “Then,” said the cat, “It doesn’t matter which way you go.”

One of the most important questions we can ask is “which way should we go?” As applied to the church, we must ask ourselves questions like—Why do we exist as a church? What are we supposed to be doing? What is our purpose; what is our identity? In other words, which way should we go?

Unlike other organizations, a church does not have to figure out its own purpose or identity. We don’t just discuss it among ourselves and come up with a purpose statement. It’s not up for debate; it doesn’t matter what we think about it. The Bible tells us very clearly why the church exists and what it ought to be doing. The Bible gives us our identity and our purpose. Unfortunately, many people who attend church, and even members of a church, may not have a very clear idea of what that purpose or identity is.

When we know our purpose and identity, we can easily see what we need to do, what priorities we should have, and how we should do things. Only when we know who we are and what we should be doing can we go on to do what we should be doing in the way we should be doing it.

Because we are having our annual meeting today, it is appropriate that I speak on matters concerning the local church. Today, I want to briefly define what the church is, and then I want to look at the purpose of the church in terms of the church’s *aim, action, and attribute*.

Hopefully, this will be review for most of us. I trust that we have a good understanding of these issues. But for those who don’t know or may be not quite sure about some of this, it’s good for us to review this biblical teaching.

- I. What is the church?
 - A. The word “church”

¹ These three categories taken from Dave Doran’s Philosophy of Church Ministry notes, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary.

1. The Greek noun translated “church” in the NT is *ekklesia*, meaning, “the called out assembly.” The word could be translated congregation or meeting.
2. Of the 114 times *ekklesia* is used in the New Testament, the overwhelming majority (about 100) refer to a local church. E.g., the church at Galatia, Corinth, Rome, etc.
3. The church is the people, the congregation, the assembly; it is not the building. The building is where the church meets.

B. What makes a church a church?

When people get together for a Bible study, is that a church? When believers attend a camp, is that a church? When you happen to meet a couple other believers at the grocery store, do you form a church? Let’s look at the biblical definition.

A local church is . . .

1. A group of baptized believers in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:41)
2. Affirming and proclaiming the true Gospel (Acts 2:42, Jude 3)
3. Observing the ordinances of baptism (Matt 28:19) and the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:42)
4. Carrying out the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20)
5. Organized with the offices of pastor and deacon (Phil 1:1, 1 Tim 3:1-13)
6. Meeting regularly (Heb 10:25, Acts 20:7)
7. Exercising church discipline (Mt 18:16-17; 1 Cor 5)

C. If a group of people doesn’t follow that pattern, it cannot rightly be called a church. Unfortunately, many churches today, because they deny the Christian Gospel and reject the NT pattern, are not true churches. Or they are seriously out of order.

D. We must constantly check to make sure we are following the pattern given to us in the Bible. *Semper reformanda*—“always reforming”

Trans: We know what the church is, and now we can consider...

II. What is the purpose of the church?

I'd like to answer that question by considering the aim, action, and attribute of the church.

A. The aim: the glory of God.

1. The ultimate goal of all things is the glory/honor of God.
1 Corinthians 10:31 Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.
Eph 3:21 Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.
2. The church does not primarily exist for us. Christ is the head of the church, and the church exists for the greater glory of Christ. The church ultimately serves God, not man.
3. That means that we don't simply do whatever people want to do in the church. And we don't do whatever seems to work best. We do what God has commanded us to do, and we do it in a way that is most likely to bring glory and honor to God.
4. When our ultimate aim is to bring glory to God, we gauge success in terms of faithfulness to God and his word. Success is not a matter of facilities or numbers of people in the pews or budget. Faithfulness is success.
5. Our guiding lights are the word of God and the character of God. We dare not do anything in the church contradictory to God's word or character.
6. Many churches today, unfortunately, format the church to be man-centered or needs-centered. People have a consumer mentality, and that means that they see the church as just another service agency. They expect the church to give them what they want; and if it doesn't, then they find another church.
7. If we believe the aim of the church is the glory of God, then we understand that our highest goal is not just to give people what they want, but to give God what he wants. We follow the Scriptures and we do what is in keeping with the character of God.

8. If people don't like that, it's just too bad. Our aim is not pleasing people; our aim is pleasing God. Our goal is to be God-centered, not man-centered.

Trans: The primary aim of the local church is the glory of God. We do all things in a way that brings honor to God.

B. The action: discipleship

Matthew 28:19–20 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.

1. The main thing the church is trying to accomplish is making disciples. The motto of LBC is “making and maturing disciples of Jesus Christ.” That’s our goal—to reach people with the Gospel message and to see them converted to Christ. We want all people to become disciples of Jesus Christ.
2. The word “disciple” in the Bible is synonymous with “believer.” All believers in Jesus are disciples of Jesus. Discipleship is not a higher set of expectations for those who are highly committed. Evangelism is the process of making disciples.
3. Once a person becomes a believer, the goal for the church is to help him become a fully-devoted follower of Christ. That’s what discipleship is—the process of following Christ with full devotion/commitment.
4. What does the process of discipleship look like? I sometimes visualize it as a baseball diamond.
 - a) First base is being saved. You’ve become a disciple of Jesus. You’ve repented of your sins and trusted in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

If you are not saved, you are not in the ball game; none of this applies to unsaved people.

- b) Second base is commitment. You've been baptized and have joined the church. You've started making necessary changes in your behavior and lifestyle. You are being regular and faithful in worship. You are reading the Bible regularly, praying regularly, participating in the ministry of the church, and enjoying fellowship with other believers.
 - c) Third base is maturity. You are stable in the faith; you know what you believe and why you believe it. You seek to live consistently according to a biblical worldview. You are actively seeking opportunities to tell others about Jesus. You attempt to defend the faith from skeptics and critics.
 - d) Home plate is leadership. You have the spiritual capacity to teach and/or to lead. You are living an exemplary Christian lifestyle. You are qualified to serve as a teacher or a deacon or a pastor. You are leading others toward Christ-likeness.
5. We want to move people through that discipleship process.
- a) We want to see everyone move around the bases. We want people to be saved, baptized, a member of the church, living a godly life, and leading others toward salvation and godliness.
 - b) Any true disciple would want to be moving forward. We should not want to stop at one of the bases and be content to be there.
 - c) How do we conduct discipleship? How do we make disciples? Acts 2:41-47 describes the basic pattern for discipleship.

Acronym WIFES:

- (1) Worship “*And they continued steadfastly in . . . breaking of bread, and in prayers, praising God*”

Participation in the services of the church is a primary means of worship. Listening to the Word as it's preached, praying, singing, giving, expressing praise and thanksgiving, confession of sin, participating in the LS are expressions of worship.

- (2) Instruction/edification “*they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine*”

Edification means “to build up.” We edify believers through biblical and theological instruction/education/training. We want to produce doctrinal understanding and stability.

- (3) Fellowship “*And they continued steadfastly in . . . fellowship*”

Fellowship is participation or partnership of believers with each other based on their union with Christ. We want to share our lives with fellow believers and serve one another as partners.

- (4) Evangelism “*they that gladly received his word . . .*” and “*the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved*”

A primary emphasis of a church should be on spreading the Gospel and attempting to convert people to Christ. We do that here and around the world.

- (5) Service “*All that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.*”

The local church is the context where believers serve one another. The local church is where we use our spiritual gifts for the benefit of the entire church.

We develop disciples through worship, instruction, fellowship, evangelism, and service. As we participate in these elements, we become more fully devoted disciples of Christ. That's the goal.

Trans: We've considered the aim (glory of God) and the action (discipleship) of the church; now let's think about...

C. The attribute of the church: purity

Ephesians 5:26–27 that He might sanctify and cleanse [the church] with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.

God's desire for the church is that it be pure. No local church will be perfect because every church is filled with sinners. Still, we must do our best to maintain the purity of the church. We do that in two ways:

1. First, the church maintains its purity by preaching the Bible and exhorting people to obey it. We teach people to love God and to love one another. We teach and expect people to live godly, holy lives. We teach the law—thou shalt, thou shalt not. We explain what God expects of us, and we exhort people to live righteously. “Preach the word.”
2. Second, the church maintains its purity through discipline.
The church must stand against error and sin. That means that we may have to remove a disobedient person from the fellowship. If a member is guilty of a serious sin and refuses to repent after being warned, the church body must eject/excommunicate that person from the fellowship.
 - a) The purpose of church discipline is restorative; we hope that the person will repent, get right with God, and be restored to fellowship in the church. Gal 6:1
 - b) But if he continues in unrepentant, flagrant sinful living, then he can no longer be a part of the church.
 - c) No one is perfect, and we don't expect perfection. What we expect is repentance and change.
 - d) Church discipline is in the best interests of the person and of the church. It's an effort to restore the person and to protect the church. A church must maintain its purity.

It's easy for a church to forget who it is, and it's easy to be confused about what it's supposed to be doing. But if we keep in mind who we are and what we are supposed to be doing, we'll not be confused.

The church is the local assembly of baptized believers in Jesus Christ who gather regularly to make and mature disciples of Jesus Christ.

The highest *aim* for the church is the glory of God. We want to operate the church and all its ministries in a way that is most likely to be honoring to God. We aim to do what God wants us to do. That means that we obey the Bible and we consider the character of God in all our decisions. We are not man-centered; we are God-centered.

The *action* of the church is discipleship. Our goal is to help *unbelievers* become followers of Christ and to help followers become fully devoted disciples of Christ. We are "making and maturing disciples of Jesus Christ." Everything we do should be consistent with those goals.

The *attribute* of the church is purity. We want our church to be obedient to the Scriptures. If a member falls into gross sin, we seek to restore that person. If he refuses restoration, he must be removed from the assembly. We must protect the purity of the church.

In the dark days of the Nazi occupation of Holland, with Gestapo everywhere and Jews vanishing, Dutch Christians asked theologian and missionary Hendrik Kraemer [1888-1965] what they should do.

Kraemer responded, "I cannot tell you what to do, but I can tell you who you are. If you know who you are, then you will know what to do."

He then read 1 Peter 2:9: *But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.*

Hearing that, the people thanked the missionary, departed, and launched the Dutch underground resistance movement.²

It's only when you know who you are that you know what to do. I trust that we know who we are as a church and that we are committed to pursuing God's goals for LBC.

² David Lane, American Renewal Project. Quoting Ronald Greer, *If You Know Who You Are, You Will Know What to Do*.