

# Church: God's agenda for local churches

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     So this is a section about what Christians are called to be and why. So reading from 1 Peter 1, verse 13. Therefore, preparing your minds for action and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all of your conduct, since it's written, You shall be holy, for I am holy.

And if you call on him as father, who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but was made manifest in the last time for the sake of you, who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you've been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God, for all flesh is like grass and all its glory, like the flower of the grass.

[ 1 : 5 2 ]     The grass withers, the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever. And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

So, put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation, if indeed you've tasted that the Lord is good.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God chosen and precious, so you yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For it stands in scripture, Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.

So, the honour is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, and a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence.

[ 3 : 1 7 ]     They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Once, you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once, you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct amongst the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Well, three weeks into this series, and summary thus far is that God's church is really precious to him.

And in local expression in church families like ours, God works out his purpose for the world. And given those two things, I think our next question needs to be then, since church is a foretaste of heaven and we're seeing how the heavenly church connects down to where we are here now, this question needs to be then, what is our agenda?

[ 4 : 53 ] If God's church here locally is so important to him, then what should we be doing? What should we be focused on as a local church family?

God's purpose in his world doesn't change, but of course, our culture is constantly changing. So how is our church to be relevant and contemporary in a society which actually thinks that the church is always the problem and never the solution?

A society that actually totally now rejects Christian values and is very, very quickly trying to right them out of society and out of life completely. And as Matt said in his introduction, and we didn't collude on this, but it was a bit scary, should we be a welfare agency focused on addressing sort of key social problems in our society, family breakdown, homelessness, unemployment, substance abuse, and stuff like that?

Well, many churches are actually on that pathway and they've got lots of government funding to help them down that pathway. Should we be, think of ourselves and think of our task as being a service provider to our local community?

And that would mean then probably, as lots of churches do, that we market our gospel message and the gospel community, we market in such a way as to make it appealing to our wider society so we can get them in the door.

[ 6 : 34 ] So we'll make it appealing for people to come to Jesus, make it easy for people to come to salvation, make our meetings more entertaining, more fun, run programs that people can easily engage in because that's what they like to do, things that make them happy.

In short, adding, making it easier for people to add a bit of spirituality into their existing lives. And again, I think there's quite a few churches around who have gone down that pathway.

Is our role primarily to be a God-honoring religious club in the world but really separated from it, certainly not part of it. So that our existence, in a sense, as we get on with being what we should be, God's people, our existence then condemns everybody else around us, even if it's a condemnation by silence.

And again, I could take you to churches that that's what they think their role is. An elite community. Then, perhaps closer to home, still other churches think their primary role, their primary thing to do is evangelism.

That is, our primary role as church is to get the gospel message out to our city, to the ends of the earth. And so, in churches like that, you'll hear that week after week, evangelism is the application for the teaching.

[ 8 : 00 ] Evangelism dominates the weekly programs as people are encouraged or pushed into it. Evangelism dominates the planning and strategy of the leaders of the church. And perhaps, even, evangelism and the amount of evangelistic activities you engage in becomes a measure of the health of the church.

So, there's a whole range of options. And I think, again, there's a whole range of confusion among Christians when thinking about the agenda for local churches.

So, this morning, I want to suggest to you that for Paul, as he writes in, and Peter, as he writes in the New Testament, it's not an issue of confusion. Paul, I think, is saying, again, like he often says, right thinking will end up producing right practice.

If we know who we are as a church, then we'll know what to do as a church. And I think it's a fairly straightforward principle.

Since God's church is central to his purposes in the world, then it is reasonable to assume that God has set an agenda for it. It's not as if he's just wound the church up and then let it loose.

[ 9 : 21 ] No, it's precious to him. He's purposed for it in and through it. So, it's reasonable that he will set an agenda for it. So, therefore, go back to the question, what is our agenda?

How do we be relevant and contemporary in 2023 in this hostile culture? Well, the answer, very simply, is by implementing God's agenda for his church.

That's it at its simplest point. Not my preferred agenda. Not the agenda that our society would seek to impose on us.

And sometimes not even the agenda of other rapidly growing and apparently successful churches. God has given us his agenda and it's summarized, I'm going to suggest, in two principles.

One today and one next week. The first principle is this and it's built into fantastic pictures as well as words. The first principle is this. Very simple. Be who you are.

[ 10 : 25 ] If you only know what God's agenda for this local church is, at the simplest point it's be who you are. The first picture I'm going to look at this morning is the one from 1 Peter 2.

This picture of the living temple, living stones and the living temple of the living Lord. Now, just to get us into the picture, here's how I want to take you into it. You see, nations and individuals are constantly making statements through buildings.

If you look at the Burj Khalifa, whatever it is in Dubai, tallest building in the world, smallest nation in the world, it's a statement and a very impressive statement about what a small, insignificantly small, but oil rich nation can do.

Incredible engineering. Likewise, wealthy people build huge architect designed homes that are often just stunningly beautiful.

Sometimes ugly, but that's a different, that's a perspective. Environmentalists, on the other hand, build small, mud brick houses and so on and so forth. You get the point. Well, I think what Peter's saying here in 1 Peter 2 is that God intends to make a statement, a very loud, bold, in-your-face statement through his church.

[ 11 : 52 ] We saw it last week in Ephesians 2, the picture of the temple built on the foundations and the prophets with Jesus as a capstone. We're seeing it again today, this living stones in the living temple of the living Lord.

God's intention is to make a statement through his church. Now, the question is, how does this picture help us work out God's agenda?

Well, it's built around the idea of the temple. See, in the Old Testament, the temple was a visible picture of God's dwelling place. It was a visible picture of how life as God created it was meant to be.

That is, God at the center in special relationship with his worshiping and obedient people, a relationship which was only possible because God in his grace and mercy had dealt with their sin and invited them to come in as family members into his home.

That is the picture of the temple. In Jesus, as we see in this 1 Peter 2, in Jesus, that picture has now become reality in Jesus but we also still enjoy the picture as it's moderated to us through Jesus.

[ 13 : 18 ] The church, as we saw last week and you'll notice that there's a fair bit of repetition week after week but also stepping forward and nuancing because this is right through Scripture.

This is just not a single verse we're looking at. This is a constant theme of Scripture that the church is a statement of God's purposes. What's his purpose?

Primarily, to reconnect to his rebellious people in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus. His purpose is to create a wonderful new family of obedient children.

Children who would honor him as their loving father. Children who would desire above all else to be like their father. God's statement through his church is to create a new community, to be in practice as a community demonstrably renewed from the inside out.

As we see in some of these verses that we just read here, no longer governed by the old self-interested, self-governing, self-ruling, self-promoting attitudes, but marked by a new unity in community as servants of Jesus.

[ 14 : 42 ] marked by generous brotherly love because God is love. Marked by unity because God is one. The church then is a statement of the good life we were created to enjoy.

And it's through union with Christ that we've been freed from the empty way of life, normal to our world. That's a very powerful statement in verse 18 of chapter 1.

That's what our world lives in and through. Generation after generation trying the same old, tired, unfilled views of life.

But we've been freed from that. Freed from that to a life of worship and service of our Lord. Freed to enjoy forgiveness from sin.

Free to enjoy renewed relationship with God. Free to enjoy direct fellowship with Him for eternity as our Father. And if you look at chapter 2 verses 1-4, we're enabled by God's Holy Spirit to grow up into Christ.

[ 16 : 02 ] Christ. In other words, what started in us is slowly moving to completion as God's Spirit renovates us in every detail from the inside out to enjoy the new life of freedom we have in Christ.

And we start to move into practicality in verses 3 and 4 there. Not just to enjoy the new life in Christ, but to overflow in that new life with what's called here, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

What are those acceptable sacrifices? Well, it's lives of trust and faith and dependency on the Lord. It's lives of service of our Lord God and service of one another.

It's lives of love where we're committed to each other and to speaking the truth to each other and building each other up and supporting each other that's the life we were created to enjoy.

That is a microcosm of heaven as we saw last week. That's what we're to be about. And the church is a statement of God's wisdom and faithfulness.

[ 17 : 21 ] Again, we saw that last week in Ephesians verses 9 and 10. Just listen to this. Remember, this was written to people who were exiles, essentially refugees.

It cost them heaps to become Christians. All the normal lines of inheritance, all the things that were important to Jews in those days, had gone.

No family name, no family inheritance, no family home, no location to call their home. All of that was gone. They were refugees, exiles. gods. And Peter reminds them that it's not all God.

They've actually got something far, far better. You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Hear the movement there? once they understand who they are, then they easily overflow into what they will naturally do.

[ 18 : 29 ] They understand who you are in Christ, then you cannot but overflow in proclaiming the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

In other words, what is the church's task, agenda? Well, to overflow out of who we are.

And what will that mean? Understanding that our Father is forgiving and loving and generous.

He validates us. He's desirable. He gives us security. And out of that overflow, to speak about God, that's what it is to speak about his excellencies, to speak about God as he deserves to be spoken about.

Our merciful, forgiving, renewing, validating Father. One overflows easily into the other.

[ 19 : 38 ] The church is a statement of God's ongoing invitation to become part of his community through Jesus. God's love. If you go back to chapter 1, verse 23, you've been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable through the living and abiding word of God.

Jesus is the living and enduring word of God who not only has called people into his house as his children, but he continues to call people into his house to be his children in real space and time, in Newcastle in 2023 and around the world.

he continually adds new living stones into his living building. And how does that work?

Well, again, link what I've just said, as we speak the words of Jesus, the life-giving words of the evangel, the gospel, and as we wrap them up in the excellencies of God who has called us out of darkness into light.

In other words, as local churches like ours, both speak the offer of real life in Jesus, fresh start in Jesus, in the gospel, and also support that declaration, and enhance that declaration, chapter 2, verses 11 and 12, and we'll come to that in a sec, by demonstrating the life-changing power of the gospel to those who we speak.

[ 21 : 19 ] Verse 11 and 12, chapter 2, Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of your visitation.

In other words, unbelievers are never going to like Christianity. They're always going to find something bad to say about it. But, says Peter, make sure that the things they say cannot be about your behavior as you live before them.

Let it be about Jesus. So, there's the two things coming together. We speak of the living, enduring Jesus, his living and enduring word that is able to call people out of darkness into light.

That's our words. And that is wrapped up and backed up and supported and made to look beautiful by demonstrably changed lives.

And again, notice the movement in this passage that we've been looking at this morning. Careful thinking and understanding of our identity in and through Christ overflows into our church family at every point.

[ 22 : 45 ] love, worship, service, obedience, being who we are together, which then overflows out of our local church into the wider community.

To say, come and experience for yourself the one who has called me out of darkness into his marvelous light. Come and experience the one who collectively have called us together out of darkness into his marvelous light.

overflow, overflow, overflow. Know who we are and we'll intuitively know what to do.

Now that doesn't fix all the details on a week-to-week basis, but I'm just interested in the principle at this stage. We'll spell it out a little bit more in detail. I keep saying that and then I'm going to leave it for Dave Bott to do when he comes back.

Sorry, Dave. So the question now then is, it's a reflective question. What statement do we make as a local church practically? I'm not asking what statement do we make in theory.

[ 23 : 51 ] I'm asking what statement do we make practically? So here's a few things that have tripped churches up over the years. We must never think, for example, that a strong mission focus is an alternative to demonstrably Christ-like relationships, unity and costly brotherly love within a local church, our local church.

We get to set up polarities. I mean, what hypocrisy would it be to tell unbelievers about the joy of salvation, the joy of being adopted into God's family, God's forever family, if our local church family was actually dysfunctional and toxic?

How does it go together? And yet, so many churches have fallen into that trap. Flip the coin and go to the other extreme. We must never think that having a strong local church community is an alternative to mission, to proclaiming the excellencies of God the Father and Lord Jesus.

Again, you see, what hypocrisy it would be if we said, well, look, we really understand and honor God's salvation in Christ and his church. That would be hypocrisy if we said that and then existed as a closed community.

Really, really happy with the Bible teaching here, really happy with the fellowship and the society of our church family and really quite happy to keep the world out there. That can't be if we really understand the connection from Scripture.

[ 25 : 47 ] If we really understand the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light, we won't be able to stop ourselves overflowing. As we speak to those, we intersect.

again, and I've heard this, it's been a few years since I heard it, but I have heard it here, people comment on this building looking old and tired and embarrassing. Was one coming?

Well, I say to you, well, that might be true at one level. I don't think it is, but everybody's got their perspective. But I would like to say this to you, that we must never think that having a remarkably beautiful building will be a replacement for having a remarkably beautiful community.

I could take you to churches, get multi-million dollar buildings and tin pot community. My friends, it is through our relationships in here, and as they overflow out into our community, that people will be attracted to the gospel, not our buildings.

That's where our impact will be. And yet, again, historically, see, if you asked Joe Blow down the street, the church has been modeled as a holy building, but the bloke down the street will say, yeah, but it's far from a holy community, isn't it?

[ 27 : 25 ] We're sunk before we even start. nor must we ever measure our spiritual health or vitality and maturity as a local church by numbers, by the structures we have here, by the programs we have here, the activities we promote and engage in, or even, dare I say, and the last time I said this a few years ago, it really stirred up a hornet's nest, so just listen really carefully to what I'm going to say now, nor is it a measure of spiritual health to count the number of evangelistic activities we have in any given year.

Spiritual health and vitality is first and foremost a measurement of being, being a radical new community of Christ's died for people.

Now, don't misunderstand me again, being a radical new community will overflow into all these other areas of mission, and we'll say more about that next week. And so it's being this radical new community, having that sense of who I am, it's that that for me at least, anyway, draws me into this church family to minister and to be ministered to.

That's community. to teach and to be taught by you.

To be a contributing part of the body rather than a demander of services that somehow I think I'm entitled to because of my club membership here.

[ 29 : 19 ] All right, well, let's move on to the second picture then and come with me to one Peter, no, what do you call him? Timothy, that's the other guy. Having said that, I've now gone and lost my place.

Tell me where Timothy is in the Bible. This is embarrassing. Yeah, here we go. I've got it now. I've got it. Sorry. So embarrassing. I have read my Bible occasionally.

1 Timothy 3, verses 15 and 16. Another picture. Paul's writing to Timothy particularly, pastoral epistle, and he's given instructions to Timothy and the local church family through Timothy about the primary focus of what they should be together as a church.

verse 15. Verse 14, I hope to come to you soon, but I'm writing these things to you so that if I'm delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth.

Again, it's a building picture, isn't it? Paul's urging these believers both to identify the foundational essentials of God's word and the gospel, and then urging them to strive to have the whole community built strongly and clearly, that's the pillars, on those foundational truths.

[ 31 : 01 ] So, what does all that mean? Well, I think it means a whole range of things. I'm only going to touch down on three or four of them.

I think at least it means this, that together, not just the pastor, not just the elders, not just the leaders, but together we have a responsibility to know the truth of the gospel, to know the truth of scripture, to know the truth of God's purpose in this world.

Why? So that we together, again, not just the pastor, not just the elders, not just the leaders, so that we together can identify and counter false teaching and promote truth.

Together, we help one another measure on the measures, measure on the important, and avoid getting tripped up by distractions or controversies that are unhelpful, that bring strife and division rather than unity and Christ-like character.

And again, that's a really easy, clear statement of our agenda. Again, you see, political parties will push political agendas, community groups, community groups will build hospitals, clubs will provide entertainment and sporting facilities, but a primary task of the church is to support, defend, and promote truth, the truth of the gospel, the truth of God's word, as found in the Bible.

[ 32 : 46 ] And that's, my friends, why teaching is front and center and important in this local church. We must be word or Bible focused as a church family, at every level, not just here on the Sunday mornings, you listen to me, but in your small groups, in your youth groups, in your fresh groups, in your homes.

We must be word focused. We must be able to help one another through that word grow into maturity in Christ, well instructed in what it is to be like Christ, able to implement the principles of scripture and the principles of the gospel into every season and circumstance of life.

So, given that, I think, personally, I think it's really sad that Christians are so, dare I say, careless about learning God's word.

Some, these days, are even opposed to God's word, saying, well, don't teach me doctrine because it's boring and tedious and unnecessary. Just let me sing praises. but here's how it works.

It's the older, younger thing that I stumbled over last week. Older Christians, it's your responsibility and privilege to be able to pass down to the next generation that which you've come to appreciate from God's word.

[ 34 : 33 ] God's word. God's word. God's word. God's word. And sometimes that traffic is from the bottom up. Sometimes our young people come with a fresh face to scripture, that is, without all the baggage that us old geezers have.

And sometimes they can see things in God's word that we've become blind to. And so that can work from the bottom up. And it does, and it has in my life, often.

Young people, don't be content just to drift in respect to God's word. You're part of something that's really nice here, but that something that you're part of has been fought for over many years.

There have been those who've stood against opposition to it and have held the course. Your job as the next generation is to identify what those things are and decide what things as you seek to apply the gospel in your generation going forward where you can be flexible and where you need to be inflexible.

And you need to do that on the basis of knowing God's word. You can only do that on the basis of knowing God's word. And what we'll find is that as we are more and more clear in our understanding of God's word in here, in this local church family where we get a safe environment to learn it, then I think when we overflow into the wider community, we'll have more and more confidence and conviction to stand our ground and know where to stand our ground and know how to stand our ground.

[ 36 : 12 ] In a sense, it's like an ordinary biological family. You learn how to relate in the safety, in inverted commas, of your local family, your immediate biological family, and that's what then equips you for going out into the wider world.

And just in passing, I'll say look, it's God's truth we're to defend and pass on. The truth is not ours to change in our generation. We're not free to say, well, okay, this will be acceptable to society, this won't be, so we'll go with this.

We're not able to say, well, look, I'd prefer to teach this rather than that. It makes more sense to try and ease people into it by being entertaining.

Well, that's fine, providing we're not, you know, not getting the sharp edges of the gospel, so it's not even recognizable. I also say, then, that being word focused is not sermon focused.

That's a big thing for our church, I think. Sometimes we equate the two, and they're not the same. Now, obviously, what I'm doing here, teaching, is I think a really valuable aspect of being in God's church family.

[ 37 : 27 ] but a sermon of itself will not bring us to maturity. I've never thought that, never will think that. Being word focused is not being sermon focused.

We need to instruct each other in the word at every point in our church family life. Being word centered will show as we move into this period of significant change for our church family.

I'm starting to move on after 23 years here. That's a big change. The next generation steps in. We will show how word focused we are as we move into that period of change, the way we handle it emotionally, the way we, again, look to see what's flexible, what can be changed if we move forward for a new generation and what needs to stay the same.



And being word centered, my friends, will happen in private, in families, specific circumstances of life, including our dealing with sin. That's when we'll see how word focused we are.

Dealing with conflict, that shows how word focused we are. So often we put the gloves on and the Bible away. being word centered means governing all of church life by God's word.

[ 39 : 01 ] It means that every decision, every direction, every program, every activity in our church family is to be formed in the light of God's word. Friends, the principle is relatively simple.

Be who you are. need to understand, therefore, who you are. And you need to understand the connection that when you truly understand who you are, you will overflow into mission as you cannot but declare the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous way.

Next week, as I say, I'll spend a bit of time on the second principle. But let me just conclude with this. Sometimes, well, not sometimes, regularly, I'm accused of being Eeyore, always seeing the negative.

I just want to finish by a word of encouragement. I am so, so thankful every single week that so many in this church, in this local church family, really are concerned to implement God's agenda, really are concerned to discover God's agenda.

For my role as an elder, leader, pastor, he's so delightful. In Hebrews, Christians are encouraged to make the joy of leaders by being cooperative, by setting the lead yourselves in terms of pursuing Christlikeness.

[ 40 : 28 ] I'm so thankful for what we have here as a church family. But it's never guaranteed unless every one of us buy into it and buy into the process that has brought us here and buy into the process of God's living, enduring word that will keep us here for the next umpteen years.

Of course, there's always room for improvement in me and in you, but I think we should be excited and thankful and all the more determined, therefore, to grow up into Christ even further, saying this has been such a good thing the Lord has given us and make sure that it's there in its completeness and in its development for the next generations.

Let me pray. Lord, so often we make things really complicated.

We think that your agenda would have us doing all sorts of programs, all sorts of bits and pieces, and we forget the basics, Lord, of being who we are. Help us, Lord, to be people who are marked by holiness, unity, and brotherly love.

In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. One more sentence. I deliberately did it this way. One of the things I delight in most over the years here has been to notice how visitors coming in and spending an hour, an hour and a half among us, the first sense of response I get to them is that they've got a really strong sense of who we are in community.

[ 42 : 24 ] They speak of warmth, warmth and welcome, and the focus on God's word. And they pick up that sense of who we are before they start thinking about what we do.

And I think that's just brilliant. Thank you. Thank you.