

What is the mission of the Church?

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[0 : 0 0] Today's reading is from two passages, Genesis chapter 1 verses 26 to 28 and Matthew chapter 28 verses 16 to 20.

Then God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on earth.

Matthew 28. Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted.

And Jesus came and said to them, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

[1 : 2 4] And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age. Now every great organisation has a mission statement, doesn't it? So the mission statement of Disney is to make people happy.

The stated aim of the founders of Sainsbury's was to provide quality food at lower prices. And apparently the original aim of Everton Football Club was to give members of a local church parish the opportunity to play a sport outside of the cricket season.

Some of us might think that Everton would have been better off sticking with cricket. But what about the church? God's people. What is its mission?

I guess if we were to visit several different churches locally and observed what each was doing, we might reach very different conclusions to that question. Is the church primarily here to preach morality to a godless society, condemning social injustice and depravity wherever it finds it?

Or is the church there to be the conscience of the nation, influencing public life, seeking to transform this world so Christian values shape education and environmental policy?

[2 : 3 6] Or perhaps a church is really a kind of spiritual charity, existing to serve the poor and needy? Or is its role to encourage community cohesion, working alongside faith and community leaders to be a focal point for social harmony?

I guess we could find churches whose mission statements, or at least their practices, are oriented towards each of these things. And they all sound very noble, don't they?

But we need to be careful. The book of Acts describes the growth of the early church as it advances from Jerusalem to the ends of the known world.

But it also records the different ploys Satan used to thwart the progress of the gospel. And arguably the most subtle of those threats was distraction. Satan's attempt to distract the apostles from their primary task by drawing their attention instead to other important and urgent needs.

So often you see it's good things that are the enemy of the best. Churches focus on good things and yet end up neglecting what's of supreme importance.

[3 : 52] So we're going to go back to basics this morning and see what the Bible says about the mission of the church. But to put that in context and avoid misunderstanding, I want us first to distinguish between our eternal purpose as human beings, in other words, why we were created at all, and our specific mission.

That's to say what you and I are to be doing while we're here on earth, our current job description, if you like, the particular task the church is to be engaged in at this point in God's plan for his world.

So first of all, our eternal purpose. Why did God create human beings? What does he expect of us? God created us to bring him glory.

And this is a consistent teaching of the Bible. Do you remember we saw in our growth groups in Ephesians 1 how Christians have been chosen for the praise of God's glory. And as we saw in our last studies at the end of Ephesians 3, Paul prays to God be glory in the church.

That's why the church ultimately exists. So this is our eternal purpose, to bring God glory.

[5 : 24] That is his due and our duty. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism famously puts it, the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

But I guess the next question is, what does it mean to glorify God? Well, Jesus, of course, summarizes it in two commandments, which are themselves a summary of the Ten Commandments.

Have a look onto those verses from Mark chapter 12 on the sermon outline. Jesus tells us, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these. So Jesus says we're to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

That's what it means to glorify God. Together, these two commandments are often known as the Great Commandment. So the answer to the question of why we exist, what we were created for, is to glorify God.

[6 : 36] And of course, because this is our eternal purpose as human beings, this is what we'll spend all eternity doing, living for God's glory. Now in a minute, I'm going to suggest that as vital as the Great Commandment is, it's not actually what the Bible means by mission.

The Great Commandment is not the same as what's often called the Great Commission. And when we confuse the two and think doing the former means meeting the latter, we're liable to get into a muddle or get our priorities as a church mixed up.

But I wanted us to start here because it reminds us the church's mission can never be used as an excuse to neglect our responsibilities to love God and people in other areas, and also to remind us what ought to motivate us as we carry out the Great Commission.

We're to tell people about Jesus supremely out of a concern for his glory. Sharing the gospel is part of how we glorify God, and the most loving thing we can do for our neighbour, of course.

Indeed, that's the goal of mission. The reason for engaging in mission is because we long for as many people as possible to be glorifying the Lord Jesus for all eternity.

[7 : 57] So our eternal purpose is to glorify God. But the Bible not only gives us an eternal purpose, it also gives us what I'm calling a specific purpose or specific mission.

A particular task to be getting on with while we're still in this world. A task that, unlike our eternal purpose of glorifying God, is only for this world.

And for that reason, it's an urgent task. In fact, 2 Peter 3 implies it's the reason we're still in this world. Why Jesus hasn't taken us to heaven yet.

So let's move on to our specific mission. Our specific mission. And the particular task Christians have is summarised by what, as we've already said, is known as the Great Commission.

Now, when we think of the Great Commission, we usually think of passages like a Bible reading from Matthew 28, a passage we'll come on to later. But actually, did you know there are two Great Commissions, as it were, in the Bible?

[9 : 03] We get one in the Old Testament, as well as the one in the New. And it's important we understand how they relate to each other. Indeed, in my view, the first one is in part a picture of the second, which fulfils it.

And understanding this will help us to avoid much of the confusion and indeed controversy which sometimes surrounds the whole subject of what constitutes mission.

So before we look at the New Testament, turn with me, if you would, to Genesis chapter 1, that first Bible reading we had. And let's notice the commission God gives people when he first creates them.

The Great Commission of the Old Testament, if you like. Genesis 1, 28. We're told, God said to men and women, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

So God tells humankind to do two things. To be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. And to subdue the earth and have dominion over it.

[10 : 20] In other words, as those made in his image, they were to bring fullness and form to a world that lacked those things, just as God had done in the six days of creation. And in the next few chapters of the Bible, we see men and women doing those very things.

So Adam and Eve have children multiplying and filling the earth. Adam is placed in the Garden of Eden to work the land and he exercises his dominion by naming the animals.

In fact, this first Great Commission sets a trajectory for the whole Old Testament. It's why we're so often told about the people multiplying.

So just turn on to Exodus chapter 1, for example, not Genesis 1, but Exodus 1. And have a look, first of all, at verse 7. We're told the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly.

They multiplied and grew exceedingly strong so that the land was filled with them. This language of multiplying then reappears in verse 12.

[11 : 26] The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread. Or look at verse 20. The people multiplied and grew very strong, or numerous as it's sometimes translated.

We're supposed to notice the author's use of Genesis 1 language here and rejoice that God's command to humanity was being fulfilled.

The world was being filled as God's people multiplied. In fact, we get language like this throughout the Old Testament and it's why so often the threats to God's people involve obstacles to this command.

Whether it's Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel being unable to have children, or Pharaoh threatening to kill all the Israelite baby boys. So here we have the Great Commission of the Old Testament.

And some would say that this creation mandate of bringing fullness and form to the world is the primary thing that ought to direct our priorities as Christians today.

[12 : 33] Our mission, they would say, includes caring for this world to help it function properly, to be wise stewards of it and ensure all those made in God's image are treated with dignity.

Now please don't mishear me. Of course these verses still have something to say to us today. After all, we do still live in this world. It's good for married couples to have children, for example, when that's possible.

We're not to exploit the environment, but be responsible stewards of this world and to treat people fairly. Indeed, we all have responsibilities within this world which is right and proper for us to meet what might be called creation work.

Doing so is part of obeying the great commandment and glorifying God. And yet, personally, I don't think our specific purpose on earth today is primarily about making babies or cutting carbon emissions as might have been the case if we still lived in Genesis 1.

Because in Jesus, our responsibility gets refocused. This world is now passing away. We're no longer in Genesis 1, but in a fallen world that's put under a curse in Genesis 3.

[13 : 51] Which means we'll never completely solve environmental problems, for example. And yet, God is in the process of creating a perfect new world.

And that's where our primary focus is now to lie. So let's move on to the second Great Commission. The Great Commission of the New Testament.

Now, there are various passages we could look at for this. For example, Jesus' words to his disciples in Luke 24, after his resurrection, which we've looked at in our sermon series in Luke. But for now, turn back with me to Matthew 28 and verse 18, that second reading we had.

Matthew 28, where Jesus says this. Verse 18. Notice the difference from the Old Testament Great Commission.

It's no longer go forth and multiply, but go and make disciples. And Jesus goes on to explain what this Great Commission of the New Testament involves.

[15 : 04] He says, Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

So making disciples involves two things. Baptizing people, which I think is shorthand for people becoming Christians because conversion and baptism usually went together in New Testament times.

And then teaching those people to obey everything Jesus had commanded. So we could say, our Great Commission, the mission of the church, includes both evangelism and edification, building up God's people by teaching them.

In other words, mission is much more, sorry, is more than just evangelism, but word ministry in its entirety. The work of leading people to Christ and then building them up into maturity, Christlikeness.

It's why our mission partners include not only the likes of the Odins on the front line in unreached Naples, but also the Hawthorns, who we prayed for earlier, training pastors in Zambia.

[16 : 15] We're not simply to make converts, but disciples. And of course, in passing, it's worth noting, mission therefore doesn't just refer to what happens overseas.

We are part of the all nations the gospel is to reach, and so are to be engaged with making disciples here in England, hence our mission partners at Holy Redeemer in Streatham.

So can you see the difference between this great commission and that of the Old Testament? Our job today isn't to fill this earth by procreation, having children, but to fill the new earth, heaven as we often call it, by proclamation, making disciples.

Our chief responsibility today, if we're Christians, is to fill the next world as we tell people about Jesus. That's the heart of what the Bible means by mission, what we might call new creation work.

And in my view, it's actually the supreme way we obey Genesis 1, 28 today. Because we need to understand Genesis 1 through the lens the New Testament gives.

[17 : 31] Do you remember how at the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus tells us the Old Testament not only foretells the death and resurrection of Jesus, but also the advance of the gospel to the nations?

And it seems to me one of the ways it does that is through this first great commission in Genesis. By describing how God's Old Testament people did grow and spread numerically despite constant threats and opposition, the Old Testament is giving us a giant visual aid of how God's people would grow and spread in the New Testament through the proclamation of the gospel.

So it's not so much that Genesis 1, 28 is obsolete so much as it points forward to and is fulfilled in the growth of the church, God's new creation through gospel ministry.

That's how we're to apply Genesis 1 today. To think our primary task is to transform or redeem this world as sadly has become the focus of many so-called mission agencies is to miss the point we're no longer in Genesis 1 and God's focus is now upon building a new creation.

That's why I don't think things like building schools in Africa or providing clean water or relieving famine actually constitute mission in the sense the Bible understands it.

[18 : 58] As worthy as those things undoubtedly are. Now this narrow understanding of mission has sometimes been controversial. But I think having a precise definition is important to prevent us from focusing upon the wrong things.

After all the Great Commission is urgent. Jesus is going to return and this world in its current form will pass away. So let me try to persuade you of what I'm saying by showing how the New Testament picks up the language of Genesis 1.28 but then uses it with reference to the advance of the Gospel.

So turn with me to the book of Acts. It's a bit like what we did when we looked at Exodus earlier for the Old Testament Great Commission.

The book of Acts. Acts begins with another version of the Great Commission when Jesus tells his apostles you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

And in the rest of Acts we see the apostles putting that command into practice showing us how they understood the Great Commission. And again and again we find them preaching the Gospel.

[20 : 17] But just listen to the language Luke uses to describe what happened. See if it rings any bells. Acts 2.47 And the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 4.4 The number of the men who believed literally grew to about 5,000. Acts 5.28 The apostles filled Jerusalem with their teaching.

Acts 6.1 The number of disciples was increasing. Acts 6.7 The word of God continued to increase and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly.

Acts 9.31 The church multiplied. Acts 12.24 The word of God increased and multiplied.
Acts 16.5 The church is increased in numbers daily.

It's all Genesis 1 language isn't it? The same language we saw in Exodus. The language used in the Old Testament of God's people growing through procreation is used here of God's people growing through proclamation.

[21 : 29] Our focus now is not on filling this temporary world but the next eternal one. God's new humanity the church grows through gospel preaching.

It's why the threats to the growth of God's people in Acts are not childlessness as in the Old Testament but things which threaten the gospel. Sorry, the proclamation of the gospel.

False teaching, persecution, distraction from word ministry and so on. Satan targets the word because spiritual birth happens through the word of God.

Incidentally, it's not just Luke who uses Genesis 1 language in this way. We get something similar in Colossians 1 where Paul describes how the gospel was bearing fruit and increasing.

So do you see that our job, the mission of the church is to fill the new earth by making disciples of all nations. That's the heart of what the Bible means by mission.

[22 : 37] And for our last few minutes I want us to unpack some implications of all this. So as a church, this understanding of mission ought to shape our priorities.

And I hope it helps us understand why the Grace Church mission statement says what it does. Let me remind us of it. It says this, it's up on the screen for those of us at Rosendale.

Our overall purpose is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. We believe that Jesus' great commission of Matthew 28, 16 to 20 is the mission of the church to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches that they might worship and obey Jesus Christ both now and in eternity to the glory of God the Father.

in other words the eternal purpose we thought about at the beginning. It goes on, we seek to achieve this overall purpose of making disciples as we, number one, build up and number two, reach out.

So both edification and evangelism as we saw earlier. I think it's a great mission statement. You see, many of those other priorities we thought about earlier, being a beacon in the community, engaging in social action, playing a role in public life and so on, may be good things.

[24 : 00] They may be part of obeying the great commandment and perhaps sometimes lead to opportunities for evangelism, but they're not in and of themselves carrying out the great commission.

The priority of a church is to teach God's word that people might be converted, discipled and then equipped to glorify Jesus in their daily lives.

mission. And the mission partners a church supports ought to be doing the same. Sadly, the definition of mission has often broadened to include almost any activity a church performs.

But as one missionary bishop noted, if everything is mission, nothing is mission. If we define mission too broadly by confusing the great commandment with the great commission, we may end up not doing any genuine mission at all because we think we can tick the mission box without having to do the hard thing of proclaiming the gospel.

And while people's felt needs matter and meeting such needs will lead to the world's approval, people's spiritual needs matter even more, even if meeting those needs may lead to the world's condemnation.

[25 : 17] Jesus himself recognized this. Do you remember how in Mark 1.38, faced with crowds looking for him to meet their physical needs, Jesus said to his disciples, let us go on to the next towns that I may preach there also for that is why I came.

Proclamation was Jesus' priority. Indeed, it was never Jesus' intention to build his kingdom here. Many of those who support missionary work that focuses on material needs argue they're building God's kingdom.

But Jesus says in John 18, my kingdom is not of this world. Rather, in Mark 1, Jesus tells us how the kingdom is actually built. The kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent and believe in the gospel, he says. Jesus' kingdom is built as people enter it through repentance and faith in response to gospel preaching.

Well, we're nearly done, but as we finish, let's not forget this ought also to have radical implications for us as individuals. Because it follows we also need to prioritize gospel work.

[26 : 35] Perhaps at this point we might be thinking, well, I'm not a missionary, so this isn't my job. After all, Jesus was speaking to his apostles in Matthew 28 and Acts 1. But look at 1 Corinthians 15, 58 on the handout.

Paul tells the Corinthians be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord. Paul says we're all to abound in the work of the Lord.

We're all missionaries. In the next chapter, he uses that same phrase to describe what Timothy was doing, what he elsewhere called the work of the gospel, being involved in this new creation work of making disciples.

This is something we're all to play our part in. And so we need to ask ourselves whether our priorities and prayers are aligned with this mission.

Incidentally, I thought Adrian and Ruth's prayers this morning were a terrific example of this. They were focused all the way through on this particular mission. Is this what drives our time and our ambitions?

[27 : 46] Even in lockdown, I wonder. How might the Great Commission change our priorities this week? And how might we use those real lives evenings in March?

Shall I lead us in prayer? a verse from 1 Peter 2 which really puts together what we've looked at over these last two weeks.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

our heavenly father, we thank you that you have given us, your church, a specific mission in this world. And we pray that you would help each of us as individuals and as a church family with your help to be those who look outward and proclaim your excellencies to a needy world.

Help us to remember that people's greatest need is to be saved from hell for heaven and therefore give us courage and opportunities even this week to speak of the Lord Jesus to others.

[28 : 58] And we ask it for his namesake. Amen.