

WHAT'S THE POINT OF THE CHURCH?

Acts 11:19-30

INTRODUCTION:

- A. What do you think? Do more people attend professional ball games or do more people attend church? If you were to go by the amount of coverage given sports in any local newspaper, you would conclude that many more people attend sporting events than go to church. You would be wrong.
 - B. *In 1993 the total attendance at worship services in the United States came to 5.6 billion. The total attendance for all pro basketball, baseball, and football games combined was only 103 million, less than 2% of the number who attended worship. (Leadership, Fall, 1994. Quoted in Current Thoughts and Trends, December 1994, 18). In other words, more people attend church in one week than attend those top-three pro sports in a whole year. (Leadership Journal, Winter 1996, 79. Their source: Statistical Abstract of the United States, cited in Emerging Trend, 5/94)*
 - C. *Fully 44 percent of Americans attend church once a week, excluding funerals and christenings...* (Shelly Reese, *American Demographics*, August 1998. Cited in *Leadership*, Winter 1999, 79)
 - D. What do all these people see in church? Why are they going? Is it worth their time? Are they doing anything meaningful there? Good question. Your time is valuable. There are many demands placed upon you. Why should Christians go to church? What's the point of the church?
 - E. Chuck Swindoll has written a whole book on the church called, *The Bride*. In his introduction he explains why he wrote the book: *After spending more than thirty years in the pastorate, I've come to a startling conclusion. We the church have almost forgotten who we are - the Bride of Christ. That means we've almost forgotten the powerful things we can do as we stand beside our omnipotent Partner. In the pages that follow I want to call us back to our role. We've drifted as the church because of feelings of weakness, aimlessness, and a lack of destiny. It's time we remember again.* (Charles Swindoll, *The Bride*, Zondervan Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994, 10)
- I. **CHRISTIANS WITNESS BETTER TOGETHER (Verses 19-21: 19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.)**
- A. It Makes Christ a More Public Issue
 - **Verse 21**, *"a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."*
 - **Verse 24**, *a great number of people were brought to the Lord*
 1. Whenever like-minded people gather together visibly, it makes a statement to the culture. We all know that. When people for any cause gather on the steps of the capitol in Olympia or Washington, it makes the news. It can be farmers on their tractors protesting low crop prices or high school students gathering around the campus flagpole to pray.
 2. Totalitarian regimes know this better than many of us Christians do. They know the power of Christians visibly gathering on Sundays. So that is one of the first things they stomp out: In the old USSR, in China, in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, in Morocco and other Islamic North-African countries..
 3. The power of numbers worked for Jesus Christ:
 - John 12:19, *So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him."*
 4. The power of numbers worked for the Apostles in Jerusalem:
 - **Acts 2:46**, *Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread together in their homes and ate together with glad and*

*sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.
And the Lord added to their numbers daily those who were being saved.*

5. And it's working right there in River City. The day we opened this building we became much more public in this community. We instantly grew 25%. When I meet new people in the lobby, I often ask how they found out about the church. Do we have a mutual friend? I have been very surprised how often people tell me they came simply because they saw the building. You see, what this building says to anyone who drives by is that there must be a lot of Jesus people gathering here. Together we are making Jesus Christ a more public issue!
6. Here's another wonderful biblical example: **I Thessalonians 1:8**, *The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere.*
7. Warren Wiersbe says *he does not attend church to hear a sermon or to have fellowship, though he enjoys both, but "to bear witness that Jesus Christ is alive and worship Him."* (cited in Charles Colson, *The Body*, Word Publishing, Dallas, 1992, 71)

B. It Makes Christ a More Credible Issue

- **John 13:35**, *"By this all men will are my disciples, if you love one another."*
- 1. Francis Shaeffler called love, *The Mark of the Christian*. Christians have to be gathered together for anyone to see that they do love each other. In fact, if you are an isolated Christian who has nothing to do with the church, how on earth do you fulfill the biblical commands to love other believers. How will you ever show the world that Christians are truly Jesus' disciple/followers?
- 2. Sometimes the church is driven underground by persecution. Even when that happens, Christians are adept at gathering together as local churches. They meet secretly in houses, or in the woods, or, as in ancient Rome, in the catacombs. They have worship, Bible teaching, mutual ministry, elders and pastors. An, remarkably, somehow they still accomplish evangelism. When the bamboo curtain cracked in China and the missionaries were able to go back and see what had happened to the Chinese underground church during decades of intense persecution, they found that the church had grow by millions of people!
- 3. The early Apostles were never content to simply win people to Christ and leave them in isolation. The plan was to create living, witnessing, growing congregations in every community.
- 4. The addresses of the books of the New testament offer another witness to the high premium God places on local congregations.
 - The Gospels and Acts were the property of all the churches. So is the Book of Revelation. But all the rest are local church focused...
 - Galatians was written to a regional cluster of churches in the region of Galatia.
 - Most of the rest of the NT letters are written to specific churches: Rome, Ephesus, Phillipi, Collosae, Thessalonians.
 - The letters to Timothy were to guide the pastor of the church at Ephesus. The letter to Titus was to guide his pastoral ministry with the church on the Isle of Crete. Hebrews was clearly addressed to a specific church. (cf. 13:23). Philemon was written to the man of that name but also the church that met in his house in Collosae.
 - James was addressed to churches outside of Palestine. Local church behavior is addressed throughout the letter, e.g., 2:2.
 - I Peter was addressed to the churches of Asia Minor (1:1). We know this was addressed to local churches because the last chapter features an admonition to the Elders of the churches.
 - II Peter implies local churches in **2:1**, *there will be false prophets among you.*

- I John was sent to the churches of Asai Minor
- II John was sent to an unknown church.
- III John was written to a church in crisis and names names.
- Jude was written to at least a cluster of Christians known to the author.
- And note that when God wanted to talk to Christians in seven cities of Asia Minor, he wrote a letter to the church in each city and recorded them in the second and third chapters of Revelation.

5. Here is a contemporary example of how a congregation of believers credibly helps others come to faith in Jesus Christ: *A few years ago we encouraged those who were being baptized to be accompanied by the individual who was most instrumental in bringing them to faith. During the service, I noticed that one rather shy woman was the person who had witnessed to four or five people. She certainly didn't look like an extroverted, raw-meat-eating evangelist to me. So at a reception afterward, I mentioned her to one of the people who had been baptized. "She must really be something," I said.*

"Let me tell you about her," he replied. "She works in my office, and she doesn't throw Bibles around or anything like that. She is just the most loving, truthful, and life-giving person in our department. She made me want to ask, 'What's going on that would make you like you are?' She didn't really give me an understandable answer. She just said, 'Come to church with me.'"

He looked me in the eye and added, "Then you and the others filled in the pieces."

That's team evangelism. (Lynne and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church*, Zondervan Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1995, 175)

6. I see this same dynamic happening over and over again right here at SCC. People invite friends and family to come to church with them. We love to have non-church people come and just check out what is going on here. And for many of those folks, the evidence of the love of Jesus Christ shines through and in time, they come to embrace the Savior. Like **Maion Jacobsen** says, *People are not persuaded - they're attracted. We must be able to communicate far more by what we are than by what we say.* (Marion Jacobsen, *Saints and Snobs*, Tyndale House, Wheaton, Illinois, 1972, 67)

7. And, by the way, let's not forget that this is all the idea of Jesus Christ! **Matthew 16:18**, *I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*

8. So the church is Jesus' primary agency is reaching the world with the Gospel...but there is also an insider genius about the church...

II. CHRISTIANS LEARN BETTER TOGETHER (**Verses 22-26**: *22 News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.*)

A. Together They Can Have Some Experts

- **Verse 26**, *"For a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people."*

1. Trace the case history of Antioch:

- There were clearly some pretty gifted people in the earliest formation of this church. They had the facts of the Gospel down cold and they were capable of communicating it very well. At least in lay terms, they were leaders of the pack. We know they did well because of what verse 21 says, *The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.*

- But down in Jerusalem there was a man named Barnabas who had distinguished himself already in the Jerusalem church as man of unusually ability to encourage people with the Word of God. So, at their own expense, the Elders at Jerusalem shipped him north to Antioch to help out this infant church. And he does well and takes the Antioch church to even greater heights: **Verse 23**, *When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.*
 - Barnabas quickly realized that this explosively growing young church was growing beyond his ability to handle himself. So strongly does he feel this, that he makes the costly and gusty leadership decision to leave the Antioch ministry for a whirlwind 200 mile round trip journey to try to find Saul and persuade him that he was needed more in Antioch than he was in Tarsus. Remember who this Saul was. He was a walking Old Testament, stunningly brilliant and educated in one of Judaism's top 2 schools of theological training. Add to that his reputation as an overachiever and the fact that Jesus Christ has personally appeared to him, won his heart to Christianity and recruited him to become an international missionary. **Verse 23**, *Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.*
2. This process of Christians learning together is laid out as God's own strategic design for the church. You find it in **Ephesians 4**. Here's a quick summary of the flow of God's plan...(**Verses 11-13**)
- God gives a few key leaders to most, if not all churches (evangelists and pastor/teachers)
 - Their job is to prepare the people of each church to be lay ministers.
 - Those lay ministers spiritually build-up all the people of the church
 - Thus the local church is marked by unity, knowledge of Christ, and spiritual maturity, i.e., they become fully devoted followers of Christ.
 - The whole process is summarized in **verse 16**, *From him [that is, Christ] the whole body [that is, the church] joined and held together by every supporting ligament [that is, you and me], grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*
 - **Ephesians 4:11**, *It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*
3. *On the most elementary level, you do not have to go to church to be a Christian. You do not have to go home to be married either. But in both cases if you do not, you will have a very poor relationship.* (Pastor R. Kent Hughes, *Disciples of a Godly Man*, Crossway, 1991, 157)
- B. Together They Can Help Each Other
- **Ephesians 4:16**, *"From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."*
 - **Colossians 3:16**, *"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom."*
1. *There's no one single brilliant strategist. We had a consultant view the management team once, and he said, "I wouldn't give a plugged nickel for any of you individually, but together, I've never seen anything like it."* (Glenn Wagner, a Promise Keepers Vice President, commenting on the organization's

- ability to get things done. Quoted in *Time*, Nov. 6, 1995. My source is *Current Thoughts and Trends*, Feb., 1996, 14)
2. Here's how God describes it in **I Corinthians 12:1, 12:1** *Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. 4 There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. 6 There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. 7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.*
 3. Coming to church is not like going to Everett Mall where you have lots of shops and you just pay your money and walk away with what you want.
 - Coming to church is not like going to Bumbershoot where you pay your money and walk around getting entertained by all the acts.
 - Coming to church is an interactive experience of giving and receiving. God never intended church to be a consumer experience. He intended it to be a family experience.
 - Church is not like going to a restaurant where you order what you want off the menu. It is like a potluck dinner where everyone brings something and we all enjoy it together. We wouldn't think of going to a potluck dinner empty-handed. There wouldn't be a meal if we all didn't pitch in and do our share.
 - Any growing church will eventually collapse under its own weight if the members of the church don't take seriously their personal responsibility to be ministering members.
 - Don't just attend church. Come to serve. I can confidently declare that this is God's will for you. Do it with graphic arts, or teaching, or moving furniture or building cabinets, or caring for little children, or singing, or discipline a new believer one-on-one, or a hundred other things. But for God's sake, **DO SOMETHING!**
 - Luis Palau has a good word: *Beware of the mind-set in looking to see if the church will meet your needs. Since when is the church a country club where you pay your dues until you find something more exciting to do?* (Luis Palau, "Here's the Church...Here's the People..." *Focus on the Family*, November 1986, 5)
 4. *Once, at a private dinner with Vince Lombardi, the legendary football coach and a friend of mine, I asked him about his formula for success. I wanted to know exactly what made a winning team. What he told me that evening applies as much to the business world as it does to sports.*

"You have to start by teaching the fundamentals," Lombardi said. "A player's got to know the basics of the game and how to play his position. Next, you've got to keep him in line. That's discipline. The men have to play as a team, not as a bunch of individuals. There's no room for prima donnas."

*He continued: "But there have been a lot of coaches with good ball clubs who know the fundamentals and have plenty of discipline but still don't win the game. Then you come to the third ingredient: if you're going to play together as a team, you've got to care for one another. You've got to **love** each other. Each player has to be thinking about the next guy and saying to himself: 'If I don't block that man, Paul is going to get his legs broken. I have to do my job well in order that he can do his.'*

"The difference between mediocrity and greatness," Lombardi said that night, "is the feeling these guys have for each other. Most people call it team spirit. When the players are imbued with that special feeling, you know that you've got yourself a winning team."

Then he blurted out almost self-consciously, "But Lee, what am I telling you for? You run a company. It'd be the same thing, whether you're

running a ball club or a corporation. After all, does one man build a car all by himself?" (Lee Iacocca,, Iacocca, 56-57)

5. A Christian could stay home and isolate himself from the church. And, I am quite confident that he could feel very spiritual and very close to God. He could also seriously deceive himself. Let me put it this way: I was very spiritual until I got married and then I discovered some pockets of sinfulness and selfishness I never knew I had. God gave me a wife to help me grow in areas I was blind to as a single man. Then we had children and I plummeted to depths of positive depravity. God gave me children to help me grow more spiritually.
6. Ditto the church. **Daniel Defoe**, author of *Robinson Crusoe* wrote, *Though I don't like the crew I won't sink the ship. In fact, in time of storm I'll do my best to save oit. You see, we are all in this craft and must sink or swim together.* (*Leadership*, Fall, 1986, 35)
7. Another writer also plays with the boating theme: *For the schooner to get out of the harbor demands a division of labor. The officers, serving under the Captain, provide leadership for many tasks. Gazing dreamily upon the horizon might be nice, but there is precious little time for it. Sails must be tended and lines spliced, brass polished, decks swabbed, compasses read, and logs kept. A working schooner, in other words, is no **Love Boat**. There is plenty to do, and the doing of it requires organization and attention to details - which is to say, te schooner is an institution.* (Donald W. McCullough, "Staying with the Ship," *Christianity Today*, April 26, 1993, 31-32)

III. CHRISTIANS HELP BETTER TOGETHER (**Verses 27-30**: 27 *During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.* 28 *One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)* 29 *The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.* 30 *This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.*)

A. It Provides a Concentrated Impact

- **Verse 29**, "*The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.*"
 1. If you became an orchardist in eastern Washington, you would join an apple-growers co-op. When a community of growers pool their resources, they can accomplish a lot more: controlled atmosphere storage facilities, packing plants, price negotiations.
 2. When it comes to helping others, Christians do a lot better together than acting in isolation. The local church functions as a funnel of information and pooled resources.
 3. If it wasn't for the local church body, how would the Jerusalem congregation have known about the hungry Hellenistic widows of **Acts 6**?
 4. If it wasn't for the local church body, how could it have been true in **Acts 4:34** that *There were no needy persons among them.*
 5. That's why we maintain a Benevolence Fund here at SCC. You give thousands of dollars into that fund every year and the moneys go out to help people in various kinds of distress. Your accumulated gifts help people you may not even know: with plane tickets to funerals, help with unemployment, relief for abused women, counseling fees for hurting people, home and car repairs for the financially distressed.
 5. This help certainly goes beyond money also...
Kenneth Kantzer was a senior editor for *Christianity Today* magazine. Back in 1992 he was diagnosed with a malignant tumor. He had several surgeries and weeks of radiation treatment. Although confident of heaven and God's care he admits...*Nevertheless, this has proved a disquieting time for my wife and me. Fortunately, the loving concern and earnest, faithful prayers of my friends have*

taught me anew the joy of resting in Christ and his sufficiency. Most of all, it is the earnest prayer and loving care of my fellow church members, many of whom I did not know even by name, who surrounded me, fortified me, and proved to be a source of spiritual strength during these days. In a new way I am grateful for my local church. Kenneth Kantzer, "Alone with God Is Not Enough," Christianity Today, March 9, 1992, 19)

6. Many of you in this church know exactly what Kantzer is talking about. I know, too. I and my family have experienced the concentrated impact of God's people loving and giving for us.
- B. It Provides a Competent Distribution
- **Verse 30**, "*This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.*"
 1. If you want to help a starving person in Sudan, how do you do it. You don't even know the name. You find a mission agency that works with reputable local churches in Sudan and you send your money through them. You sure don't want to send your money to any third-world government agencies. It will never reach the poor but will rather line the pockets of dictators and bureaucrats.
 2. Let me give a little more of the context of **Acts 4:34**: *34 There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.*
 3. A couple years ago we were stunned to learn from Manuel Fernandez that he was planting churches in Cuba. If I wanted to get money to Cuba to help purchase a house for a church meeting place, I wouldn't have a clue how to do it. But I can write Cuban churches on my offering envelope and SCC will forward the gift to World Link Mission and Manuel's mission will get that money into the hands of a local pastor and a house will be purchased for a church. And some of you have actually done that. Castro won't get a dime of your money. It all gets used for the Kingdom of God.
 4. That's the beauty of a worldwide network of local churches giving and disbursing the riches of God to meet needs.

CONCLUSION:

- A. *Politicians can rearrange stuff on the surface of life. They can spend money and enact legislation and draw attention to a cause. But they can't bring fundamental transformation into the life of one individual. They can't rewrite the eternal; address of a msingle person. They can't order genuine reconciliation between two estranged human beings. They can't instill character into anybody. They can't turn a selfish heart into a servant heart, or a granite heart into a giving heart. (Lynne and Bill Hybels, Rediscovering Church, Zondervan Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1995, 203)*
- B. How important is the church in God's program? **Ephesians 1:10**, [The church is] *an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth. (NASB)*
- C. The church us the flagship and the centerpiece of all that Jesus has been doing in the world for the past 2002 years. The church is a really big deal with God.
- D. *A strange sign appeared on the desk of a Pentagon official. In bold black letters it read: THE SECRECY OF MY JOB DOES NOT PERMIT ME TO KNOW WHAT I'M DOING. (Charles Swindoll, The Bride, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994, 47)*

"There's nothing like the local church when it's working right.

Bill Hybels

Timothy G. Walton
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