

286 *What is church for?*

I've tried repeatedly to write something like this article, but it wouldn't gel, so I emailed my 'reader' list and asked, 'What is the purpose of your church?' (Better: what is *God's* purpose?) One reply resonated: 'To build and celebrate community both in the church and in the village – and bring glory to God by so doing.'

After five years wrestling with the Bible – especially the OT, which I used to cherry pick – a number of strands have developed for me, and I'm trying here to draw them together.

First, what is God's overall plan for the whole world, from Genesis to Revelation, with Jesus as the central focus? I think it's to bring heaven to earth – but what does that mean?

Genesis shows that it started well, but we thought we knew better, so God withdrew his presence. Because of his great love, God has come to us again and again – and each time we thought we knew better.

Our view of God has progressed over the 3000 years since Abraham: we are no longer war-like tribes – kill or be killed – and we no longer see God (the gods) as capricious and needing to be placated with sacrifices... well, hopefully not.

God comes supremely, of course, in Jesus – but we thought we knew better and killed him. God turned that into the final victory over sin and death. What's more, God came by his Spirit, who lives *in* us, so that *we* can bring God to others, bring heaven to earth.

And in Revelation we are promised how heaven will fully and finally come to earth, and all (our) wrongs will be righted in the ultimate victory of good over (our) evil.

The next big strand for me is that of 'community'. We need community at every level from family to church, to area, to country... and internationally. Unless we can *all* work together this world is going to descend into chaos and darkness.

And, for me, what brings these strands together is the binding force of the Lord's prayer, which is now a central part of my life.

*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on **earth*** – God come to earth, and we have to work with God for that to happen.

*Give **us** this day **our** daily bread; forgive **us our** trespasses* – that's the community, and we have to work with God for that to happen.

No form of church is 'right' or 'wrong' – we all get it wrong. I see it as a spectrum, and I have personal experience of both extremes. Now, this is a biased view, I know, but I'm so much happier in my (our) current position.

One end focuses more on individual sin and individual salvation, what's right and what's wrong, and when you believe, you can *then* belong to that community.

The other end focuses more on being an inclusive, welcoming community, trying to make a difference now. Then, by belonging, people come to believe in Jesus.

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