

Proclamation of the Gospel

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for the Salvation of Humankind

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Introduction

The Great Ends of the Church

What do we mean when we speak of the Great Ends of the Church? It would be easy to imagine this as a list of goals the church as a whole should seek to fulfill. There is truth in that understanding. But the term *end* in this case does not mean “goal” exactly. Rather, it means purpose, reason for being. For instance, we can say that the “end” of the family is the protection, nurture and care of its members, especially the creation and formation of the next generation. That does not mean such care is only for some future date. It means that at all times, from the beginning of history, these have been the tasks, the definition, of family. Such ends function as goals in the sense that we are always to carry them out.

We can see the same use of the word *end* in the famous first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “What is the chief end” of human existence? The response, “To glorify God and to enjoy [God] forever,” clearly does not mean that we are to do that in the future, but not now. It means, rather, that only by glorifying God are we really fully human, human as God created us to be. In the same way, the Great Ends of the Church are the reasons for its existence, the purposes for which God has called us together. They are marching orders for the present, not goals in the distance toward which we are to strive. Granted, since we do not at present perfectly embody God’s purposes for us as the church, the “ends” for which we have been called together also function as targets for the growth and development of the church. They are yardsticks or plumbines by which we measure our current church life.

In a culture dominated by a scientific mentality, we are accustomed to thinking of a cause as that which precedes an effect. We think of cause and effect as the normal sequence: first the cause and then the effect. So when we look for the cause of the church, we look for that which preceded it and led to it historically. Perhaps we think of Jesus actually establishing the church. We look for the cause as coming before that which it effects. But that has not always been the way people thought, nor do we really operate on that basis all the time.

When people decide to go to college they do so at least partly because of the goal they have. The future they desire leads them to make certain decisions. The intended future can be the cause of a present activity. In that case, the “end” or goal determines the present. Events are pulled from the future as well as pushed from the past. The cause of the church is God’s desired future, and on that basis God has called the church into being. It is not our past that creates the church but God’s future. Since the people of God have existed for millennia in history, the church has a past, and there are causes in that past that have led to effects and continue to do so. But what must determine the church’s life is not the past as cause, but the future as “end.”

If the Great Ends of the Church represent the purposes or reasons for the church’s existence, then when the life of a congregation fails to exhibit these ends in the midst of the social setting in which it lives, the congregation has, to some degree, forfeited its claim to be a church. It has become another human organization, a club, with purposes it has established for itself. To go back to the example of the family: If parents cease to care for their children, if all the members of a biological family stop having any relationship with one another or concern for one another, they have ceased to function as a family. Therefore, to study the Great Ends of the Church, to measure our life as a congregation by these standards, is to see if we are really embodying what it means to be a church.

Notice that we have spoken of the congregation, the local, organized gathering of God’s people. It is ultimately at this level that we must measure our life as the church. All the rest exists as support, as connection with other congregations. But the life of the church is judged where the church gathers weekly, where baptisms add to the people of God, where face-to-face meetings are renewed constantly at the Table. We cannot substitute what the church does at the national or presbytery level and assume that this fulfills our obligations. For instance, if the General Assembly or the presbytery has programs of evangelism and mission, and our congregation supports these programs financially, that does not mean we, as a congregation, have become evangelistic. The question is: If Christians form a lived community, how do they exhibit the purposes for which God has called them together? Often they will use the channels of the wider church both as support and as avenues of expression of their concerns. There are very good reasons to carry out international and even national missions at the level of the General Assembly. There are good reasons to have churchwide programs and resources. Yet a congregation’s

mission does not end when it supports programs at wider levels. The Great Ends of the Church cannot be delegated to other parts of the body of Christ. They are the measure of the faithfulness and genuine “churchness” of each congregation.

Though we are concentrating here on the life of a congregation, we shall see that congregations are not independent units, unconnected to the wider reality of the church. The Ends of the Church are for the whole church, but they are also lived out in the midst of the committed gatherings we call congregations.

Furthermore, these are not specifically “Presbyterian” ends. That is to say, we are not judging in these statements how denominationally oriented a specific congregation is. Rather, the statement of the Great Ends is our understanding of what any church of any denomination ought to be. The structures of a denomination, and the ecumenical relationships it establishes, are for the purpose of helping congregations live out these ends.

The Great Ends of the Church are also not individual. That is, they are not descriptions of what it means to be a Christian. In fact, many of these ends cannot possibly be fulfilled by one person. They are, almost by definition, descriptions of what a community is to be. Granted, these purposes should also give direction to the individual lives of members. The lives of individual members are governed by the fact that they know themselves to be part of the church. Love for others, mercy, and a forgiving and generous spirit all may be virtues an individual can display, but they are only developed and lived in community with others. I may assume I am a loving and forgiving person when I am by myself. It is when I am in community, when I am together with those I find difficult to love or forgive, that I really learn how to develop and exercise these virtues. There is a distinction between the church as a group of interconnected denominational structures, on the one hand, and the personal and interpersonal embodiments of Christian life together on the other.

In the midst of our highly individualistic culture, we are reminded that we are called to be the church, not simply individual Christians. Furthermore, the church is not a gathering of like-minded individuals. Rather, the church is prior to the individual. There would be no Christians without the church. The message of the gospel came to each of us through the proclamation and nurture of a congregation. It is therefore absolutely essential that we examine our common life to make sure we will be able to carry that message to others.

The Ends Are Plural

The Great Ends of the Church are plural. The text in the Form of Government lists six such ends.

The Great Ends of the Church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. (*BO*, G-1.0200)¹

These ends are not listed in order of importance, as though we could choose one or two and ignore the others. All are part of what it means to be the church, and to the degree a congregation fails to exhibit any of them, it fails to be fully the church. This is not because there is a requirement to “pass” an exam as a congregation. Rather, it has to do with the character of the ends themselves.

Think of the six Great Ends as points around a circle, each one related to all the others. That is to say, each of the ends supports the others. Evangelism would be difficult to carry out if the congregation were not nurtured by faithful worship. Nor can worship be faithful if there is no concern for preserving truth. The same connection can be found among all of the ends.

Not only are the six Great Ends connected, they also help define each other. When we speak of the gospel that is proclaimed, that gospel includes and leads to social righteousness, worship, truth, and so forth. One cannot choose one of the ends and let the others be carried out by other congregations.

Since all of the ends are therefore related to all the others, one can enter into a study of this circle at any point, beginning with any one of the ends and progressing through each of the others. The choice of starting points depends on the issues and concerns of the church at the moment. The various confessions in our *Book of Confessions* would place different emphases on the Great Ends. For instance, the Theological Declaration of Barmen stressed the preservation of the truth in the face of Nazi demands concerning the church’s teaching:

In view of the errors of the “German Christians” of the present Reich Church government which are devastating the Church and are also thereby breaking up the unity of the

German Evangelical Church, we confess the following evangelical truths: . . .

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.

(Theological Declaration of Barmen, *BC*, 8.09–12)

The Confession of 1967, in the midst of the civil rights struggles and other divisions in our nation, stressed reconciliation, which includes “the promotion of social righteousness” and “the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.” The Westminster Confession was concerned with the nature of the church as the community of believers, and therefore it stressed “the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God,” as well as “the maintenance of divine worship.” At the same time, we cannot imply that the Westminster Assembly was not also concerned about the preservation of the truth.

The list as we have it shows signs of the origin of the list itself in the early years of the twentieth century, when the Protestant missionary movement was strong. So the first end concerns the evangelistic task of proclaiming the gospel. Evangelism was a strong emphasis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was the great period of Protestant mission efforts around the globe. Evangelism came naturally to the community of faith. There was a renewed realization of the importance of evangelism for the nature of the church itself. Such an emphasis was also supported by the wider culture. Even in secular terms, the nation was sure that its culture, its democratic institutions and values, were to be shared with all the rest of the world. The culture was dominated by Protestant Christian understandings. There was little hesitation to assert that these institutions and values were the best, and needed by all other people.

Today the situation has changed dramatically. Though many congregations are aware of the need for evangelism, we are often confused about what it means or how it can be carried out. We live in the midst of a culture very different from that of the early 1900s. The secular society does not support evangelism, and this makes us question why we should try to have others believe the way we do.

When we read the list of the Great Ends of the Church, we are immediately aware that we are deficient precisely in the area the church in the early twentieth century was most sure about. Therefore it is good for us also to begin by posing the questions about evangelism quite directly. Whereas for them it was a natural starting point because it was a strong element in their life, for us it is a needed starting point because we are weak in this area.

The First of the Great Ends

The first Great End of the Church is “the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.” In the following chapters we will look at the meaning and implications of this statement. In chapter 1 we will begin with the meaning of “proclamation.” In chapter 2 we will move to the understanding of what the gospel is that is to be proclaimed. Chapter 3 will seek to comprehend what salvation means, both what we are saved from and what we are saved for. Chapter 4 will look at the scope of salvation: for whom is this saving action intended by the proclamation of the gospel?

Note

1. In source references, *BO* stands for the *Book of Order* (Louisville, Ky.: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2001). *BC* stands for the *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Ky.: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1999).

Study Questions

1. How are the Great Ends of the Church different from goals? How are they the same?
2. Do you see a consistency between the Ends of the Church and your own church’s goals as they are listed, for example, in its mission statement?
3. What does González mean by the statement “events are pulled from the future as well as pushed from the past” (p. 00)?
4. What do you think of when you use the word *church*? Do you think that the church universal and the particular church are both legitimate expressions of the meaning?
5. Do you think that the church is necessary for the development of Christian virtues? (See Paul’s letter to the Galatians, chap. 5.)
6. It has been noted that the composers of the Great Ends started with the issue they considered most important at the time. With which end would you begin with today?

“To Proclaim . . .”

The Word Itself

The word *proclaim* has a rather archaic sound. We do not use it often in ordinary conversations. Perhaps when young lovers wish to make public their affection, we might say they are proclaiming it. In earlier times kings issued “proclamations.” Proclamations are official, authoritative statements. We generally reserve the word *proclaim* for momentous occasions.

The word comes from two roots: *pro*, meaning before, and *clamare*, meaning to cry out. We find this second root in our word *clamor*. By changing the prefix *pro* we alter the word to acclaim, or declaim, etc. To “cry out before” gives us the image of the town crier or the herald, complete with bell or trumpet, calling the attention of the people to the significant public statement that was about to be made.

To proclaim something is more than to announce it. Stores announce sales. Rulers proclaim laws. Couples proclaim their love when they wish it to be known by the whole world. We do not proclaim what is private, if we wish it to remain private. Proclamations are public, statements to the world. The very purpose of proclaiming is to make something public.

There is a risk in proclamation. That is, if the public does not approve of what is being proclaimed, then there can be repercussions. Parents may not approve of the announced love. Even kings knew that their power might be challenged if their proclamations were unpopular.

What this first statement of the Great Ends of the Church declares is that the church exists in order to proclaim. It exists in order to make something public. That cannot be said about all organizations or institutions. For instance, schools exist to educate people. They may wish to announce their programs, they may wish to tell the public what they are about, but they do not exist for the purpose of proclaiming to the world. Families exist for the nurture of their members, particularly

for the next generation. Families do not issue proclamations. But the church, as we say in this statement, exists for the purpose of proclaiming something.

The Problems of Proclaiming Today

In our own day, many of our congregations have a difficult time proclaiming. There are a variety of reasons for this. First, in our culture, we tend to view our relationship to God as something very private. It should not enter into the public sphere of our lives. We need to ask the question, Is our relationship to God indeed a private matter?

In addition, we are not sure to whom we should be proclaiming what we believe. Would it not be better to invite others to come to us, to listen to us if they are interested? We can be welcoming. We can even proclaim our invitation. But to proclaim what we believe seems an invasion of the privacy of others. For this reason, many Presbyterians have difficulties with the whole notion of mission or evangelism.

Furthermore, we are not sure exactly what it is we should proclaim. Is it something about our own experience? Is it something objective that is other than ourselves? Is it something about what our congregation is like? Is it announcing services we provide to the community? Finally, even if we agree we should proclaim something; even if we agree about what it is we should proclaim; how do we do it in this culture? Do we put advertisements in the paper? Buy time on radio or television? Stand on the street corner? All of these questions are in our minds when we hear the statement: the church exists for the purpose of proclaiming. Let us look at some of these problems.

Public versus Private Realms

For several centuries, Western culture has made an increasingly clear division between what belongs to the private realm and what to the public. What can be demonstrated scientifically, objectively, regardless of personal biases and opinions, can be discussed publicly. This has been the ideal of truth since the modern period began in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Other matters, such as religious beliefs, are viewed as personal opinions. Each person has a right to his or her own, and there is no expectation that such beliefs need to be proven in any rigorous, scientific way. In fact, there is the sense that they could not be. Religious beliefs are therefore “opinions,” not “facts.”

This may sound rather condescending toward religion; and in fact, it is. The question of how faith can properly address public issues is a

major concern in our society today. We will come back to this issue later. However, although it is clear that this disjunction between public truth and private truth came about because of new standards of truth based on developments in science, it was accepted by societies in general for some other reasons as well.

In the seventeenth century, Europe had been racked by wars of religion in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation. It was a bloody and destructive time. Even though religion was used as a cloak for political power, it was clear to many people that a secular state was a great advantage over a state that enforced a particular religion on all people. We can see the wisdom of such toleration even in our own day, when we see ethnic conflicts around the globe that pit Protestant against Catholic in Ireland, Muslim against Orthodox against Catholic in the Balkans, Muslim against Christian in Indonesia, Hindu against Muslim on the Indian subcontinent.

A secular state that permits people to choose their own religion and practice has great advantages over state religion. But the result was the privatizing of religion, which raises the question of how public one can make one's private opinions. Are we invading the "private space" of another person when we ask about their faith or tell them about ours? Our culture makes us think twice about doing either. To speak publicly about our faith—to proclaim it—puts it in the arena of public truth and takes it out of the realm of private opinion. It asserts that our religious view is a fact, something true for all people, not just for us. That is a difficult assertion to make after several centuries of thinking otherwise. It is not only that we hesitate to speak to others about our Christian faith. We may also be somewhat embarrassed if someone asks us about our faith. It is as though they had asked about something too personal to discuss. In addition, in this country we assume there should be a great deal of personal freedom to choose what to believe or do, as long as such actions do not infringe on the freedom of others. There is outcry against laws about personal safety—wearing seat belts or helmets, for instance—as though this were an invasion of personal freedom. What we do is no one else's business. If we wish to take risks, that is our concern. The thought that our actions do affect others, whether in higher insurance costs because our freedom leads to injury that results in large medical bills, or whether our actions lead young people to follow our example, is disregarded.

All of these factors together mean that for many inside and outside the church, religious truth is truth for me. It is not necessarily truth for anyone else. Their truth in religious matters may be quite different than

mine, and I am bound to respect that. Under the proper circumstances, I might tell someone else about my experience of God, but my truth may not speak to them, and we must leave it at that. Scientific truth, objective truth, may be pushed as universal. Religious truth is by this definition subjective and ought not to be considered universal. Such a climate obviously makes evangelism difficult.

The Authority of the Church

Underlying many of our questions is the issue of authority. We live in a highly individualistic culture. We assume that people have a right to their own beliefs, and that others should not infringe on this right. Nor should an institution speaking in their name limit this right, even if they are members of it. For the church to issue a proclamation seems to allow the church an authority it should not have.

We have seen this attitude in our denomination when the General Assembly has spoken on behalf of the whole church, and many individual Presbyterians have been annoyed that the Assembly thought it could speak for all Presbyterians. A proclamation by the church, be it congregation or General Assembly, seems to give to the institution more authority than many in our culture wish to give it. This is not only an issue for Presbyterians. Even churches that have been accustomed to having great authority in the lives of their members, such as the Roman Catholic Church, are finding the same response from many of their members in this country.

The issue of authority is even more complex for the church than for other institutions in our society. When the church proclaims, on whose behalf is it speaking? In one sense, it is announcing to the world what its members believe. In another sense, however, it is declaring God's word to the world. What is the connection between these two? That is part of the difficulty. For whom is the church speaking when it proclaims? For its members? For God? For both?

We have lost much of the sense of the church as a divine as well as a human organization. Again, in part this is due to the scientific worldview or mentality within which we live. We analyze institutions sociologically, politically, economically, etc. When we do, we can look at the church in the same way we would look at any other organization in our society. That is the only way the social sciences can proceed. We do with the church what we also do with the Bible when we deal with it as we would any other piece of historical literature. This does not mean that science is evil. But it does mean that it is limited in the conclusions it can reach. The social sciences can and should deal with

the church as a human organization. That is to be expected. We also, as members of the church, need to remember that the church is indeed a human institution and prone to all the frailties of any human endeavor. The social sciences can aid us in this awareness.

For believers, however, the church must be more than a human institution. It is not a human creation. It is the creation of God in Christ. It is the body of Christ. It is a divine creation just as much as it is a human institution. Human science can and should only study the human character of the church. Believers, however, ought to know the divine mystery that is also the church.

When believers are so embedded in the scientifically oriented culture in which we live that they forget this divine dimension of the reality of the church, then they too act as though it is only a human institution. It speaks for its members, and it has no right to speak for us when we do not give it permission to do so.

We see this issue arise in many aspects of the church's life. For instance, let us look at questions about the Form of Government. It has been part of the historic understanding of Presbyterians that no "instructed delegates" can be elected to any governing body. That is to say, congregational members cannot elect elders on the basis of how they promise they will vote on issues. Presbyteries cannot quiz potential commissioners to General Assembly as to how they will vote on questions coming before that body, and then elect them only if they agree to vote in a certain way. Governing bodies must be free to listen to God's voice when they deliberate. They are to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in their decisions. Therefore, they cannot be instructed beforehand. (See the Form of Government, *BO*, G-4.0300d.)

Today, however, there is often a desire to alter this arrangement. If governing bodies are to "represent" us, then they should vote the way we would. That is the human understanding. The church is more than a human institution, but only to the degree that it is open to the leading of God. Does God act in the church when it makes decisions? Ought we as a congregation to elect as elders those who agree most with our opinions or those who seem most able to listen to God? This may be a difficult distinction to make if we assume our opinion is the only one God agrees with. To elect uninstructed delegates is to give to governing bodies more authority than many of us are comfortable with, when we view the church only as a human organization.

On the other hand, if those who are elected do not actually seek the guidance of God but rather treat their office as a position of power in a secular fashion, then those who elect them are even more likely

to want to see the political “platform” upon which they seek to be elected, before the vote takes place. Faithfulness on the part of the members in choosing officers as well as faithfulness on the part of those who are elected are the only guarantees that our system of church government actually will work. To deal with the church as only a human institution is to corrupt the system.

No system of church government can function properly without faithfulness. Probably every system will work if its members and officers are truly seeking to be faithful. What Presbyterians have devised is a system of government that limits the damage a few unfaithful people can do by curtailing severely the power any one person has. But it is no guarantor in itself that it will work well. Where does the power lie for encouraging faithfulness in the whole system? Ultimately with congregations. If they elect as their elders those who exhibit a desire and an ability to seek God’s will for their life and the life of the church, and if congregations elect as pastors those who seek to develop this ability within themselves and the congregation, the system will work ultimately. Without these building blocks, nothing will work as it should.

Confusion about What We Are Selling

Many of the television evangelists make it appear that the church is selling God. We recoil at such an approach. God is not a commodity that can be advertised as useful. We know that. There is clear witness in scripture that those who are faithful may find their lives disrupted and the price of discipleship high. God makes demands. Many Presbyterians therefore are reluctant, and rightly so, to say that faithfulness to God will make our lives better in purely secular terms.

We have had little hesitation, however, about selling the church and equating that with evangelism. If we are comfortable proclaiming anything to do with Christianity, it is probably about our congregation. We are friendly, have a great music program, a great preacher, a youth program, a mission program, whatever it is that we think will bring in new members. We even develop programs so that the congregation will be more appealing to outsiders. We are selling the services the church provides. We seek to make the church useful to the community. Obviously, some of this is good. The congregation needs to be about mission in the world. But proclamation about what the church can do for you is not the same as proclamation about what God has done for us.

Perhaps our reluctance to speak about God’s action and our eagerness to speak about our congregation goes back to the previous discussion about the scientific mentality within which we live. What