

## Sermon for Sunday, August 22, 2010

### Dr. Dan Doriani Our Purpose

#### Our Purpose

#### 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Our society seems ever more comfortable criticizing Christianity. In 2000, vampire novelist Anne Rice told the world she had become a Christian. She recently announced that she remains committed to Christ but not to Christianity or church: "It's impossible for me to belong to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, deservedly infamous group. In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay, anti-science [and] anti-life." So she is giving up on the church, which she judges guilty of all these things.

I'm trying to understand why the media thinks the author of violent, sensual vampire novels should be construed as a serious religious commentator. Maybe the title of her novel "Queen of the Damned" leads them to believe she has deep thoughts about eternal destinies. At any rate pundits jump on her statement as if it's a major event. It's another chance to hold every church, every Christian for the worst things done by anyone who calls himself a Christian. The most "quotable" statements by Pat Robertson and worst decrees of medieval popes are trotted out – and all the good ignored - as if these moments are the essence of Christianity.

The reasoning, an insult to the word "logic," goes like this: Pat Robertson is a Christian. Pat Robertson is a big fat jerk. Therefore all Christians are big fat jerks.

The pundits then find one poll that points to a steep decline in the number of people who call themselves Christians and pretend the other polls don't exist. Then a church consultant adds a batch of hand-wringing statistics. Disaster looms, he declares, unless we ride my plan to restoration. But not every plan for church restoration withstands close scrutiny. Yet it's good when they tell us how to keep the form of Christianity fresh.

#### **Point 1: The welcome**

The consultant says people want solid new music, buildings that are inviting to everyone, and ways of gathering that don't exclude anyone. Good. We want people to feel good when they are with us. But of course, we aim for more than their comfort and sense of belonging. We also want them to believe.

#### **Point 2: The worship**

Our consultant warns about things that seem old or formal. He says people don't like pulpits, organs, formal buildings, formal dress or formal language – it puts people off needlessly. The consultant has doubts about confessions of sin and confessions of faith written in 1650 (the golden age of confessions).

They want spontaneity and authenticity. Pastors prove they are authentic by smoking cigars, cussing in casual conversation, and listening to music that's popular at Berkeley. If they're really liberated, they use "bad words" in the pulpit.

A few go much further. They don't just criticize particular sermons, they doubt the very concept of sermons. The idea that one person can speak for God seems arrogant, elitist, moralistic, rationalistic, and authoritarian. Never mind that the Bible is full of sermons. Not only that, several books tell future pastors how to lead and – wait – how to preach.

We also find confessions of faith and of sin in the Bible. Scripture is our guide, not our consultant. The book, *Deep Church*, by Jim Belcher carefully analyzes what is good and what is flawed in all this. It's a temperate book and it says profound things about worship services that are too innovative.

But he also speaks to people who think they have nailed the Bible: "In order to be faithful we must draw on not only Scripture but tradition as well." Why? Because prior generations worked hard on the same questions we face: We want to "hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that [we] can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9).

So we draw on Scripture first, tradition second, and, Belcher continues, "we also draw on our cultural sensibilities and our desire to 'worship before the nations,' making sure our worship is accessible to an outsider." By keeping "Bible, tradition and culture" together, we can form "a worship gathering that is neither irrelevant nor syncretistic" - combining Christianity with false religions.

When we link Bible (first) with tradition and culture, we have worship that is "simultaneously countercultural and culturally relevant." That is, we speak so the culture hears, but the culture, including us Christians, who are part of our culture, also hear God's challenge. Thus our worship needs God and the Bible at the center, but history and today's culture in clear view.

There are two mistakes: a service that seems like it's from another century and a service that has more or less no reference to the church universal. I hear about services that are cute, entertaining, or dramatic. The secular person thinks, "Pretty good for amateurs, but if I want entertainment, I'll see the pros at the cinema or theater." So they leave, *thinking* they tried Christianity and found it lacking.

### **Point 3: The consumer**

Our consultant also wants to warn the church about *consumerism*. Right! Some people go to the grocery store and mall to buy food, clothes and electronics and then come to church with the same mentality: I'm here for an emotional life, life *wisdom*, *friendships*, and of course, a guarantee of *eternal life*. A part of us agrees with this critique. Christians can buy into the consumer culture. But wait - people *do* come to church to gain wisdom and true friends, to correct our thoughts and to center our feelings. We do hope to gain eternal life. What exactly is the problem?

[Getting at the charge that Christianity is immoral] the consultant says that the Christian consumer forgets that Christ calls us to a kingdom. God called Abraham not just to be blessed but to be a blessing to the nations. Same with us. The Lord offers us blessings, but we are part of his kingdom. Jesus says his disciples feed the hungry, visit the sick and the prisoner, welcome the stranger (Matt 25). Micah 6:8 says we must "do justice and love mercy and walk humbly before our God."

Amos 5:11-24 tells Israel that God hates their worship, music and offerings. Why? Because they trampled the poor, took bribes, and deprived them of justice. If Israel wants we trample and we should "let justice roll on like a river."

Isaiah says God's leader must be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land." He says, "The noble man makes noble plans, and by noble deeds he stands" (Isa. 32:2, 8).

Our consultant says people are hungry to live God's way, so we should proclaim it and practice it. We agree. But we still have a concern.

### **Point 4: The cross.**

Belcher describes a moment of truth from a conference aimed at dialogue between theologians. One speaker: "I don't even bother with sin and salvation anymore when I present the gospel. I invite [people to participate in] a movement in which Jesus has destroyed the... powers of the world."

Well, yes, Jesus has triumphed over the powers of the world. But "I don't bother with sin and salvation"? The Bible says Jesus came to take away our sins (1 John 3:5). We teach that humans are sinners and offend God. Jesus gave his life-blood to atone for sins. We should not care if someone thinks this sounds unpopular, traditional, bloody, or barbaric, the Bible says it, from Genesis to Revelation.

So there are challenges to the faith – from the rising tide of confident atheists to the critics within the church. What shall we do? I invite you to consider how Paul faced a similar challenge – when it was far harder to be a Christian leader.

### **Paul's plan**

The Lord commissioned Paul and Barnabas to take the gospel to the Roman world. How would he do that? He presented the unchanging gospel in ever-changing ways. He never changed his message, but he constantly adapted his methods. His style was flexible, his content, fixed.

He presented one gospel in many places. He used many tactics to get people to listen to one message about their problems and the solution found in Christ. He changed his introduction, his arguments, even his lifestyle to remove cultural obstacles, so he could present the trans-cultural gospel.

Unchanging gospel, ever-changing methods – we saw this in 2007, when we studied Acts. What I discovered had great impact on me and shaped our church. We have tried to become more flexible in every area – discipleship, outreach, service. As a result of that study our worship services are both more diverse and more traditional. The form has changed, but every service uses readings, confessions that tie us to the church universal.

Paul states this explicitly in 1 Corinthians 9 and he practiced it in Acts. We start in Corinthians where he states his theme several times. In vs.19, "I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible." In vs. 22, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."

This explains Paul's behavior as an apostle. The grand idea: he refuses to exercise his rights if that exercise could interfere with the gospel. He admits that he can seem inconsistent, at times, but there is a reason for everything. He has the right to take a wife, but marriage could limit his freedom to serve the Lord, so he doesn't marry (1 Cor. 9:5, 7:32-34).

He has the right to take a salary for his work as an apostle. The Lord said, "Those who proclaim the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (9:14). But Paul gave up his right to material support. He refuses patronage, because it could obligate him to his patrons, and thus restrict his freedom to preach the gospel (9:7-14). He works for free, so he owes nothing to anyone.

His conduct could be baffling, too. Sometimes he lived "like a Jew, to win the Jews." Thus he observed Jewish laws about food, to avoid offending Jews. He did this even though he knew it was not necessary since he is "not under the law" (9.20).

The same holds for food offered to idols. Because an idol is "nothing" Paul knew he was free to eat such meat. But some, "the weak," had misguided scruples about eating it. The solution was simple for Paul: eat whatever the people around you eat. If they eat meat, go ahead. If not, don't. Goal: Cause no offense, so he can preach the gospel. He wasn't doing whatever he pleased, he was denying his personal rights and freedoms, so he could serve God's gospel. A good example!

Paul's sermons in Acts show the same flexibility. When he spoke, he surveyed his audience, looking for points of contact: With Jews he said Jesus is the Messiah who you waited for so long. With pagans, he said "I noticed an altar to an unknown god. Let me tell you about Him." I want you to see this for yourself, in a survey.

### **Acts 13 Preaching to Jews**

On his first journey, Paul visited a synagogue. When they invited him to speak he told them Jesus is their long-awaited Messiah. He then told the story of Israel, showing how it leads to Jesus.

God chose the patriarchs, a small clan that he taught and formed. In time he led them to Egypt, where they prospered and grew until the Egyptians enslaved them. So he led them out of Egypt "with mighty

power" and made them into a nation and gave them the land of Canaan. After a difficult period without central leadership, God gave Israel a king. The first king, Saul, seemed impressive - tall and handsome, bold and decisive. But he was like every other king. His power was his first concern (1 Sam. 8-15).

So the Lord removed Saul and gave Israel David, a king "after my own heart" (Acts 13:22). David did put the Lord first and protected his people, but in his later years he drifted and abused his power. So the Lord promised a greater king for David's throne. He told David: "When your days are over I will raise up your offspring to succeed you and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam 7:12-13).

Paul then announced that Jesus is the Son of David, the promised Messiah (Acts 13:25-26). Strangely, Israel's rulers did not recognize Jesus, even though he fulfilled the prophets. Paul explains how (13:32-37). God said he would install a King who is also his Son (Psa. 2:6). The Bible says God demonstrated that Jesus is God's Son "by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:4).

This fulfills Psalm 16. It promised that God would not abandon David to the grave, "nor let your Holy One see decay" (16:10, 13:35). But David is still in his tomb. The promise seems to be unfulfilled (Acts 13:36, 2:29). But Jesus, Son of David, received the promise, for God "raised [him] from the dead" so he "did not see decay" (13:37).

Despite all this, the authorities executed Jesus for sedition. They laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead. He was seen by many witnesses (13:27-31). This leads to Paul's direct appeal to his hearers: Don't repeat past errors. Believe in Jesus. Receive forgiveness of sins and life. Thus the sermon mentions the death and resurrection. All Paul's sermons did. He was delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification (Rom. 4:25).

### **Paul and simple pagans**

One chapter later, Paul is in Lystra, where he healed a man who was lame. A crowd decided Paul and Barnabas were gods visiting mankind and tried to worship them. Lystra was a modest agricultural town, with no synagogue, no centers of learning. Paul quotes no Scripture. He quotes no philosopher.

He speaks so farmers understand: There is one God. He created heaven and earth. "He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy" (Acts 14:17).

Rain and crops – he speaks their language. But he also challenges them. They must worship this true god. It's senseless to worship them as if they're gods. They must turn from idols to the living God, who created heaven, earth, and sea (14:15).

Paul is gentle, to win them: "In the past, he let all nations go their own way (14:16). Paul never got to finish, but his direction was clear. Their religion is vain, so they must come to Christ. Paul was gentle, for "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it through him" (John 3:17).

### **Next, Paul preaches to sophisticated pagans in Athens.**

The message is very different. Paul surveyed the city and struck up many conversations in the agora, the marketplace for goods and ideas. Eventually someone invited him to address the intellectuals at Mars Hill. Paul had noticed all the idols and they grieved him, but he used them as his point of contact (Acts 17:22-25).

He began with a compliment: "Men of Athens! I see that you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked at your objects of worship, I found an altar with this inscription: To an unknown God. Now what you worship as something unknown I proclaim to you." God made the world and everything in it, so he "does not live in temples built by hands... No, he gives us life and breath."

Your own philosophers have said, 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' And 'We are his offspring.' But if we are God's offspring, we should not worship an image made by man. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent and prepare for judgment by the judge whom he raised from the dead" (17:26-31).

The same logic - one message, many forms - is why we are now a multi-site church, located in Clayton and Chesterfield. We have five worship services each week and each is a bit different. Lots of people move from service to service, but it's the same: One message, presented in a variety of ways, in several worship styles. Let me summarize the character of each.

We have two "classical" worship services Sundays at 8:30 and 9:45, with a choir and organ, with other instruments, too. The 11:15 service is eclectic. The 5:00 service, Trio, is relaxed, with a food/chat break in the middle and communion each week. West County Fellowship is similar and meets in Chesterfield. So we have four styles in three locations. We have diversity in our services, yet unity. All draw on Christian prayers, confessions, hymns through the ages. Above all, we focus on God and his word – an unchanging gospel in ever changing forms. Is it a hard time to be a Christian? It always is. But when we grow, connect, serve together, it gets easier and richer. This leads to our purpose statement:

We seek to glorify the triune God by embracing the gospel, building our community, making disciples and transforming societies....

### **We embrace the gospel – one unchanging gospel stated in versatile ways**

The point: We have one gospel of Christ, stated many ways. John Calvin said in his Institutes 2.16.19: "Since the whole sum of our salvation is comprehended in Christ, we must beware of deriving even the minutest portion of it from any other quarter."

- If we seek salvation, the very name of Jesus [teaches] that he possesses it.
- We find patience in his nativity, for he became like us in every respect, "that he might learn to sympathize with us."
- If we seek redemption, we shall find it in his passion.
- If we seek acquittal, we find it in his condemnation.
- If we seek remission of the curse, we find it in his cross.
- Purification is in his blood, newness of life in his resurrection, security in his kingdom. Every blessing is from him, so let us be satisfied with him alone.

### **We build our community**

We connect through community groups. Small groups, where people get to know each other. This church tends to focus on teaching and learning, and we're good at it, but we can hide behind. Community is life on life: not just mastery of knowledge. In small groups, like the groups of four to six people in Discipleship by Design, we get to know each other.

This entails risk. If we raise kids, eat meals, and spend money together, we can't manage our image or relationship any more. The truth emerges. We disagree, disappoint each other, forgive each other, and keep living together. We exchange ideas without necessarily aiming to convince or get our way.

It's OK to grow close by studying together. But remember something Paul said: "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me — put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." You heard, "What you learned or have seen in me." We learn by watching. But we can't watch if we do nothing but read the Bible and pray.

I've mentioned the three kinds of small groups before. Some are kingly: their focus is service. Others are priestly: we pray, care and connect. Others are prophetic: we grow by teaching and learning. A group is legitimate whatever its focus: serving, connecting, or growing. You don't have to study the Bible to "count."

## **We make disciples**

Jesus' final charge is "Make disciples of the nations." We can grow in three ways - By growing through study, by caring for each other, by service. All three really form disciples. When we care for each other, we learn what love and patience are – more effectively than if we studied the word. Service groups have to know what they are doing – study – and they care for each other.

Parents, please know that we want to help you disciple your children. It begins with prayers and baptism and meals for the new family. It continues in our nursery, where children are learning scripture at two, three, four, and five years. Peeps, our mid-week child care program is more than baby sitting. It's discipleship, too.

## **We transform societies**

We serve the world first by the gospel, bringing people under the wise and tender care of Jesus. But we do more tangible service too, than most realize. We have dozens of partners, and once we sign up with a group, we usually keep going for decades. We have served in Haiti for 30 years, entering the lives of national and regional leaders. Yes, we put up buildings, but serving with and under national leaders, we strive to equip Haitians to solve their problems. We also sponsor hundreds of orphans, feeding and educating them in Kenya and India.

Locally, we work in prisons and in jails, in an ever-expanding ministry. We work with refugees, helping them gain life skills and jobs. This summer about twenty members of our youth group worked with Beyond Housing every Monday to improve the homes of disadvantaged people here in St. Louis.

Our school offers an excellent Christian education to nearly 300 students. We offer all sorts of help to poor mothers of young children and to women with challenging pregnancies. There is much more.

It fits the pattern: one purpose – to extend love and care to the world in Jesus' name. But we have diverse gifts and interests. However you want to serve, we can probably help you do it, if you don't know where to go or how to start. How? We hold to the one unchanging gospel and apply it in ever-changing ways.