

God's centre of attention: the church

Churches today are told to be purpose-driven, Jesus-driven, contagious, unstoppable, emerging, five-star or 'come as you are'. Chris Green, who has recently authored a book about church, explains why he is more deeply committed than ever to God's people



I have stood with 15,000 people singing to stunning contemporary rock, and I have sat with two people as we prayed in silence. I have listened as women and men have told their stories of how Christ has transformed their lives, and heard how groups of Christian friends have encouraged, helped and guided them along.

I have been with people from 35 nations as we have prayed the Lord's Prayer in our own languages, and discussed with those same people how we can work together across the differences that in the recent past have led to war.

I have seen extraordinary acts of compassion by God's people, and extraordinary acts that could only have come from God himself. I have met people from countries I could not place on a map, and we have treated each other as we truly are – closer than blood relatives in Christ.

Time after time I have thought, 'I wish every church could be like this'. Often I have thought, 'I wish our church could be like this'. And I know I am not alone.

I have a dream

The Bible begins and ends with God in perfect relationship with his people, from Adam and Eve together in the Garden, to untold billions gathered in the great City Garden in Revelation. And at each step of the way between those two, God gathers his saved people together, to speak to them, hear from them, and change them to be more like him. God's gathered people is what the Bible calls 'church' – a gathering with a wonderfully rich purpose.

The awful opposite of being gathered as one of God's people is to be scattered as one of his enemies: lonely, loveless and lost in a spiritual exile, for ever. Moses prayed about those alternatives every day.

'Whenever the ark set out, Moses said, "Rise up, O Lord! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you." Whenever it came to rest, he said, "Return, O Lord, to the countless thousands of Israel."

We are not the good news. But we are supposed to be the evidence, proof, plausibility, manifestation, physical or cultural expression of the gospel, and that is a tough challenge

And just as being gathered by God was Israel's greatest blessing, so being scattered by him was their greatest potential judgment. Hundreds of years later, Nehemiah also prayed for the future of God's people then in exile.

'Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name."

His church

The church is God's centre of attention, and all his creative power has been bent towards achieving salvation for us. It was only to form his church that the Father sent the Son, that the Son went to the cross, and that the Father and Son sent the Spirit.

It was only to form a church that God made creation. Every atom of every star exists solely to bring glory to God as the redeemer of his people. He wrote the Bible only to speak to us and bring us to salvation. He warns our leaders that we are *the church of God, (say this slowly) which he bought with his own blood.*

Whether your church is purpose-driven, Jesus-driven, deliberate or intentional, whether it is contagious, irresistible, unstoppable or provocative, whether it has been recently rediscovered or is only just emerging, whether it is five-star or 'come as you are', equipping or connecting or

even unleashed (all of them recent book titles), you can have confidence in God's great plan in making a people for his own possession.

Church – a group of vibrant, loving, risk-everything people who are passionately committed to living out the values of God's Word and looking forward to the new creation – that is a plan worthy of God himself.

I have a nightmare

But you and I have also endured the nightmare of dreadful services, deadly meetings, bitter power struggles and lingering hurts. Those charged with teaching truth have spread lies, those charged with sharing ministry have kept it to themselves, the broken have stayed broken and – worst of all – the lost have stayed lost.

And some of us are keenly aware of our own responsibility for that nightmare. I vividly remember being halfway through preaching a sermon and almost seeing the message scroll across the bottom of my sight-line: 'this is very boring.'

If the church is not functioning properly, and we are the church's leadership, then we know where to start to look to place the blame. Survey after survey supports the idea that churches are seen as boring, irrelevant and bigoted, and that Christians yearn for what CS Lewis called 'Deep Church': passionately God-honouring, intimate, truthful, connected around the world and across the centuries.

There are cheap ways of addressing those problems which are as flawed as the problems themselves. Some of us have insisted on staying comfortably boring, without caring for the lost, because we do not want to put ourselves out for others; and we have claimed that anyone who does do what we can't be bothered to do has trivialised the faith.

A growing church *must be* a compromised church. And there are churches which have reasoned that the way to make God interesting is to make church entertaining, or intellectually relevant, or spiritual, and so the space is filled with lights and smoke machines, or is dark and candlelit, or is empty and Zen-cool – but the Bible is never opened and humbly taught.



Both dream and nightmare are vivid, so the pastors who lead churches, and the churches whom they lead, have a right to know who they are and what they are to do. That was why I took up the daunting offer (it wasn't my ideal) to try to summarise what the Bible says about us.

It's left me more deeply committed to church than ever, more excited by our future, and more focussed on our tasks. I have dug into favourite passages and discovered truths that are still mint-fresh, and I have been thrilled and startled by parts of my Bible that I hardly knew: Acts 13-16, and 2-3 John especially.

As I started to write, I had some words of advice from an experienced pastor ringing in my ears: 'Whatever you talk about most is your gospel'.

At a time when there are more books than ever about the church, we need to remind ourselves that however much we talk about it, and however highly we esteem it, the church is not the gospel. We are not the good news. But we are supposed to be the evidence, proof, plausibility, manifestation, physical or cultural expression of the gospel, and that is a tough challenge.

But we have the only resource we need: God's Word as the instrument by which the Holy Spirit addresses Christ's gathered people and transforms us to be like him. Together. As God said to Moses, 'Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me.'

This article was adapted from Chris Green, *The Message of the Church* (The Bible Speaks Today), Inter-Varsity Press 2013, and used with permission.

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