

## Introduction

Following the life, death, and resurrection of a man named Jesus of Nazareth, a community of faith was born. A small fellowship was formed among those who believed that this Jesus was the Christ, God's Messiah, the Savior of the world. Then, one day, God's Holy Spirit came pouring into the hearts of Jesus' frightened followers and together they gave birth to what we now call the Christian Church. The Bible says "**They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ... People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were being saved.**" (Acts 2: 42 & 47) All this took place nearly 2,000 years ago. However, over time this church became more and more powerful and subsequently more and more corrupt. Gradually a protest movement gained strength until finally, what began as a reformation became a revolution. Staggering under the strain of its own inner turmoil, the church family split up. New churches were founded, including the Reformed family of faith, of which our Presbyterian denomination is a member. That was some 500 years ago. Then, almost 210 years ago the first Christian Church was founded here in Plattsburgh. It was called The First Presbyterian Church. Today, we are gathered in the same sanctuary where Presbyterian Christians have worshipped for the last 133 years.

## I

So what? What difference does that make? It's not where we've been in the past that concerns us most, it's where we're going in the future. And the problem is, we have competing visions of what path we should be taking. As a church we seem to be trying to head in several different directions at the same time. In his popular book "*The Purpose Driven Church*" Rick Warren points out that "every church is driven by something. There is a guiding force, a controlling assumption, a directing conviction behind everything that happens." The question we need to explore together is this. What is the driving force behind our church? Warren lists the following examples. **Churches driven** by tradition, where change is almost always seen as negative, and stagnation is interpreted as "stability." **Churches driven by personality**, where the most important question is, "*What does the leader want?*" **Churches driven by finances**, where the question at the forefront of everyone's mind is "*How much will it cost?*" **Churches driven by program** where all the energy is focused on filling positions to maintain and sustain the programs of the church. **Churches driven by buildings**, where maintaining the building becomes the biggest budget item and the tail ends up wagging the dog. **Churches driven by events** where the goal of the church seems to be to keep people busy. **Churches driven by seekers** where the primary question asked is a marketing one—"What do the unchurched want?" Well, what do you think? What is the driving force behind our church?

## II

Granted, all these driving forces play a role in shaping any church, but as Warren points out, what is needed is a church that is driven by purpose instead of by these other forces. Working with a historic congregation in Texas, Warren asked the group of leaders gathered, "How do you **feel** about your church?" Most of the comments expressed a quiet sense of satisfaction. One man summed it up by saying, "We have a **sound** church." But as he probed deeper Warren discovered that the church was sound all right, **sound asleep!** While the church was theologically sound, nothing of spiritual significance was taking place there. Their buildings were all in good shape but the church leaders had become lazy and lethargic. Since they'd hired him to be their doctor, Warren gave them a simple prescription: Rediscover your purpose.

## III

Well friends, that's exactly why our history matters. And that is why our congregation's Vision Team is encouraging us to engage in a close encounter with the "*Great Ends of the Church.*" The "great ends" are a Biblically-based, theologically-sound summary of the purposes of the church. They were adopted around 1910 and are found on p. 176 in your Presby. Handbook. (By the way...) Our goal is that by reacquainting ourselves with these basic church purposes (rather than reinventing new ones) we will establish a common foundation for shaping the future of our life together. **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.** Mind you, this is not a list of competing purposes. We are not being invited to a smorgasbord of goals, where we can pick and choose the purposes we like best. Rather here is a holistic vision of the church's life. Witnessing to others, fellowshiping with one another, worshipping God, educating ourselves and our children, and advocating for social justice are all our business. Indeed, a faithful congregation cannot have one without the others. Yet, there's no getting around the fact that we bring diverse views about each of these goals. And perhaps our disagreements are nowhere more evident than in the first great end of the church, *the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind*.

## IV

Now what in the world does that mean? Well, for starts, the English word *gospel*, or good news, is derived from the Greek *evangelion*, which also gives us the English words *evangel* and *evangelism*. Evangelism, preaching the gospel, proclaiming the good news, telling the story of Jesus and his love, is a primary purpose of this and every church. We have good news and we must proclaim it. St. Paul announced the gospel this way: **if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.** ... He goes on to clarify: **You're not "doing" anything; you're simply calling out to God, trusting him to do it for you. That's salvation. With your whole being you embrace God setting things right, and then you say it, right out loud: "God has set everything right between him and me."** Saying things out loud has a way of making them more concrete. It was one thing for me to embrace Darlene Rugis as the woman I wanted to marry. It was quite another to say out loud, with knees knocking: "I promise to be your wedded husband." It is not only important to believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, it is essential to say it right out loud **"God has set everything right between him and me."** No doubt you have said it before, but I invite you to hear yourself, and one another, say it again. If you believe with your heart, I encourage you to repeat after me like you mean it: **"God has set everything right .... between him and me."** **Scripture reassures us, "No one who trusts God like this—heart and soul—will ever regret it." It's exactly the same no matter what a person's religious background may be: the same God for all of us, acting the same incredibly generous way to everyone who calls out for help. "Everyone who calls, 'Help, God!' gets help."** (Romans 10) That's salvation.

## V

What we are saved from is called sin. The Holy Spirit confirms God's presence with us here and now, saving us from congenital selfishness, unbearable loneliness, paralyzing guilt, and crippling fear. Christ frees us "to live in the lively, joyous reality of the grace of God." He saves us from unfounded anxiety over the future—the future of our planet, the future of our church, and the future of our very own lives.

As the Bible says, **"There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love."** What we are saved **for** is service. "We are saved for no less than to be the love of God walking about and doing good in our violent, all too greedy, self-indulgent culture. Our task as the saved isn't to twist heathen arms until they mutter the right words. Our task is to be the feet, arms, and face of Jesus, to care (for God's good earth) and to care for people as Jesus did, all people, the poor, those who are different, even those who irritate us." (The Rev. James Howell) Because, as Thomas Merton put it, *"God loves us not because we are good, but because He is."* In other words, we are not saved because we are in the church. Rather we are in the church because we trust that **"Everyone who calls, 'Help, God!' gets help."**

## VI

**But how can people call for help if they don't know who to trust? (asks St. Paul) And how can they know who to trust if they haven't heard of the One who can be trusted? And how can they hear if nobody tells them? And how is anyone going to tell them, unless someone is sent to do it?** Well, you guessed it, that's where we come in. Christ is sending us to tell the world about the One who can be trusted. Our purpose is not simply to save individual souls so we can grow our church. Although we must be willing to embrace the

inevitable changes that will take place “*as God adds those who are being saved.*” **“Follow me and I will make you fish for people”** says Jesus. (Matt. 4:19) But remember, biblical fishermen were not using fishing poles with hook, line, and sinker. Instead, they cast their *nets* into the sea. And since nets do not discriminate, evangelism means taking in all kinds of people, not just those who think and swim like us. The only thing we need to share in common is that we have each embraced **“the One who can be trusted.”** The church is like God’s lifeboat with a motley crew whose purpose it is to welcome all humankind on board. Of course, knowing this crew, we are not likely to stand on street corners and shout at passersby, or knock on doors to ask the unsuspecting occupants, “*are you saved?*”. Nevertheless, **“how can people know who to trust if they haven’t heard of the One who can be trusted?”** True, we Presbyterians send people around the world to tell the good news, including 235 full time mission personnel and some 400 volunteers in mission. Yet, the sad truth is that the real high gods for most of us here in Clinton County, no matter how pious we are on Sunday morning, are money, pleasure, success, or the next big deal. Nevertheless it is you and I who are being sent to let people know how to call for help, who to trust. That’s why we’re here.

### Conclusion

One thing is sure, we cannot depend purely on Paul Heller’s preaching. Parson Brownlow, a Methodist, made this observation about Presbyterian exhorters: “*I do not recollect to have ever heard more than one who closed till he was completely out of strength, words or ideas! ... Of all the deaths that ever any people died, there is none so distressing as being preached to death.*” “Proclaiming the gospel for the salvation of humankind” does not mean preaching people to death. Rather, as the quote attributed to St. Francis advises: ‘Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.’”