

THE CHURCH IN THE FULFILMENT OF GOD'S CREATION PURPOSES
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The grand narrative of Christian Scripture has long been seen as a 'salvation history', and with good reason. The particular focus of this narrative in Western theology, however, has narrowed to an emphasis on personal salvation as the goal of that story: God loves me, even *me*.

This, of course, has deep roots in evangelical piety, and hymnody. Charles Wesley's much loved 'And can it be' repeats the refrain, 'Amazing love! how can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?' John Wesley's description in the diary entry of his 'Aldersgate experience' finds its greatest resonance for modern readers when he writes, 'I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved me from the law of sin and death.'¹ Arguably, it is this expression of the doctrine of Christian assurance that has had the greatest impact on the wider Church—more than his central concern for Christian perfection—and is at the heart of evangelical expressions of faith. The redemption offered in Christ Jesus is for all sinners, and each may know personal salvation.

However, the focus on the individual has come in many places to encourage a self-centred view of faith, the ultimate expression of which may be found in popular worship songs with lyrics such as 'You took the fall, and thought of me above all'.¹ Theologically, this song appears to say that the whole purpose of God's redemptive work in Christ Jesus is for my sake; as he died, Jesus thought of Dwight Swanson!

The personal outworking of salvation, however, needs to be set within a much bigger context—nothing less than that of God's purposes for the whole of his creation. Indeed, the Church needs to be placed within the context of God's purposes for the whole of his creation. As surely as God created everything 'good', so does he intend in redemption to restore the good of the whole of his creation.

For holiness people this has an additional twist. The danger for us is, first, in thinking of holiness apart from God's creation purposes; and, secondly, in considering holiness as little more than a personal experience. We cannot speak of personal holiness as if it is a private task for individuals. John Wesley's oft-quoted (if misunderstood) dictum, slightly

¹ Michael W Smith

paraphrased, that there is ‘no holiness but communal holiness’² must be placed alongside the previous Wesley quotations. As we discuss the nature of the Church, we holiness people are discussing the outworking God’s creation of a holy people.

If the story of salvation is seen as God working out his creation purposes in the redemption of humanity, the place of the Church as holy community becomes more critical. In what follows we will look at the story of God’s redemptive work with emphasis on the communal aspects of that redemption. We will consider the ‘we’ of salvation before thinking of the ‘I’. This is a conscious attempt to look at the Scriptures through the lens of the first listeners and readers, who lived in societies that thought first in terms of ‘we’ before ‘I’; and in this we in the West might catch a glimpse of the approach to life common to most of the world outside the West.

*God’s creation purposes*³

Having used this phrase several times already, it is perhaps time to define what is meant by its use. By this we mean simply that the biblical canon presents a narrative that reveals that God’s creating acts have a purpose. The purpose, as narrated in Genesis 1, is an order of relationships between God, the heavens and the earth, and the creatures placed in the heavens and the earth including, perhaps emphatically, the humans. Genesis 1:27b, ‘male and female created he them’, and Genesis 2:24, ‘therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh’, explain the outworking of these purposes as essentially social and communal. God chooses to fulfil his loving creation purposes in human society. That is, God intends a humanity in full fellowship with himself, and with one another—and, not to be forgotten, with the created order around them. Whatever we may make of what happens in Genesis 3, these purposes stand unchanged.

² I am certain I will be neither the first nor last to refer to this Wesleyan crux in this conference setting. The original quotation, ‘no holiness but social holiness’, is from the preface to the 1739 edition of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*. I realise that in some languages the translation will be the same for both English words. The current phobia for the word ‘social’ in American conservative political discourse as meaning socialism might suggest Wesley was a socialist; this term might suggest communism. But both would be a failure to understand either terms.

³ The broad development of this theme is similar to that of Richard Bauckham in his *The Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*, Paternoster, 2003, and will show affinities to a wide range of interpreters of the Pentateuch, particularly Leviticus.

The damaged relationship and the seeds of restoration

Genesis does go on to describe the damage done to these relationships. Human sin broke both fellowship with God and human community, and God has purposed in Jesus Christ to restore relationships in keeping with his creation purposes. Gen 3:14-19 describe the nature of the breach of faith with God in terms of enmity, pain, and death. An unstated question arises by the end of Genesis 3: what is God going to do about this? The rest of Scripture is the story of how God acts to restore humanity to his purposes. To begin with, however, Genesis 4-11 narrows the focus as to the means, or agent, of restoration.

This can be seen in a number of ‘new beginnings’ that prove not to lead to restoration. Firstly, we are introduced to Noah at the end of the genealogical list of Genesis 5. There the pattern of ‘he lived so many years, became a father, lived so many more years, then died’ in the first nine generations from Adam (besides Enoch, of course) is broken by the expansion on the naming of Noah. He is named ‘Rest’ because ‘out of the ground that the Lord has cursed this one shall bring us rest...’ (5:29). Surely, we are intended to understand that this is the one through whom God intends to restore humanity.

This understanding seems confirmed in Gen 6:1, where ‘the Human began to multiply on the face of the ground’. A new ‘beginning’! Thus we expect, at first, that the ‘sons of God’ will be agents in this salvation. But this proves a short-lived illusion, as the result of the union of sons of God and daughters of men is not restoration, but universal wickedness (6:5).

Hard on the heels of this false-start, the narrative returns to Noah, who is singled out for his particular righteousness in contrast to the rest of humanity. Our question is, how will Noah bring rest? We look for the answer at the end of the flood, and find another new beginning. God pronounces blessing on Noah and his family (9:1), sealing his promise with a covenant; and Noah plants a garden. Sadly, once again, the initial hope of a new start is soon lost, this time in the troubling story of Noah’s drunkenness and its results.

Where will redemption be found?

It is, perhaps, with some scepticism that we read the generation list in Genesis 11. It follows a similar pattern to chapter 5, and similarly breaks the pattern in the final generation to list three sons. Noah did not bring rest; what can we expect from Terah? Not much; he dies. Of his three sons, one dies before him, and one is unable to have children. There is little hope at the end of Genesis 11. But Genesis 12 begins with another pronouncement of blessing from God—he blesses Abraham, and the descendants who will come from him, and all nations through him.

The repetition of ‘blessing’ five times in three verses draws our attention to this passage in the narrative. This is different from the new beginnings that precede it, for we see quickly that God’s purposes are now focussed on this one man, and it is through this one man that God intends to bring creation blessing to the whole of the earth. God chooses a particular man, not as an individual, but as founding father of the particular family through which he will exhibit his redemption.

This text is a central crux, theologically, for our understanding of God’s purposes. In these verses we have an answer to the question of redemption: it will come to all creation through a people of God’s choosing and making.

A holy God in the midst of a holy people

It is not the purpose of this paper to recount the entire biblical narrative. Having narrowed the focus to Genesis 12:1-3, we may now move directly to the full development of the theme, as revealed at Sinai. The key text for understanding that ties the thread from Genesis 12 is Exodus 19:5-6: ‘Now then, if you will obey me faithfully and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is mine, but you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (TNK).

This is a great ‘holiness’ text, and it is worth considering its importance in the sweep of the biblical story. Firstly, these verses form the preface to the whole Sinai narrative up until the people of Israel depart for the land of promise. Thus they give us in summary the essential purpose of all that follows—the revelation on Sinai contains the content of the covenant relationship of God with his people. This is the nation descended from Abraham, and this is fulfilment of the blessing of Genesis 12 (Exod 19:3). Secondly, the relationship between the blessing on Abraham’s descendants and the blessing on all the nations of the earth in Genesis 12 is made plain by the phrase, ‘kingdom of priests’. At Sinai God forms a people whose purpose is to serve all the nations of the earth as mediators to God. Everything that follows in the Sinai revelation is a description of this priestly function. Thirdly, this priestly role requires the people to be holy to God—consecrated for this service, and maintaining holy relationships because they are living with the Holy One in their midst.

None of this is new to anyone reading this text and hearing this paper. Even so, it is important to emphasise the centrality of what has just been noted. And, we need to recall that this is all about a people. It is not a call to individual holiness, it is for the whole community of faith.

All of this ties directly in to our discussion of God's creation purposes. Both Genesis 12 and Exodus 19 make clear that the purpose of the holy covenant community is to model God's creation purposes for humanity. And, crucially, to be the means by which humanity is restored to God. We will return to this latter purpose when we discuss the New Testament, where it is more explicitly shown. The first, however, is the focus of the Pentateuch.

The New Testament proclaims that Christ came to fulfil the Law (Matt 5:17), and as the end of the Law (Rom 10:4). The practical result this has in much Christian thinking and practice is to view the Old Testament as redundant or irrelevant. The strong Reformation viewpoint that the old covenant is about works-righteousness, and legalism (with its emphasis on the individual), encourages the Christian to regard the 'legal' sections of the Pentateuch as of little use. However, we need to consider just what teaching Christ fills full; to understand how Christ is the goal of the law, we need to grasp the starting point. And there are two important clues to understanding how this works that are found in the very structure of the narrative itself.

The first clue is that of the arrangement of sacred space in the Wilderness: that is, the arrangement of the people in the camp. The camp is referred to numerous times in Exodus-Numbers, beginning with the arrival of the people of Israel at Sinai (Exod 19:16). However, it is not until Numbers 1-2 that we are given the description of this camp. The ideal arrangement of the people of God is with the Tabernacle at the very centre. In Exod 40:34 the glory of the Lord fills the Tabernacle, and so the presence of the Lord is visible there. The centrality of the Tabernacle places the Lord at the very centre of his people. The Levitical families are then placed around the Tabernacle, as a buffer (Num 1:53) between the heightened purity of the Holy Place and the people going about their everyday lives. Then, around the, the people of Israel are camped, three tribes on each side of the Tabernacle. This is 'the camp'. The people, within the camp, are holy by relationship to God in their midst. The whole of the life of the people is organised with the keen awareness of the Holy One at the literal as well as figurative centre of life.

The Book of Leviticus is all about how to live with the Holy One in one's midst. The offering of sacrifices and purity obligations (Lev 1-16; or, loving God with all your hearts, etc), and the instructions of how to live in the Land (17-25; or, loving the neighbour as oneself), instruct the people how to be able to approach the Holy One, and how to live as a holy people in relation to this Holy One. This is the conceptual world of the Pentateuch. This is the model for human community in relation to God, the paradigm of restored relations: the

people of God, holy priesthood, encamped around the presence of the Lord, in the bond of covenant relation to God.

The second clue to understanding is contained within the first, and that is the centrality of holiness for the people of God. If the picture of the camp places the Holy God at the centre of community life, in Leviticus the command to be holy as God is holy can be seen to be at the centre of the narrative, both literally and figuratively. In literary terms, the structure of Leviticus has been described as a ring, with chapter 19 as the turning point.⁴ Rather than reading the book consecutively, in a linear fashion, this understanding of the literary structure means that the first half of the book develops towards a climactic point in Leviticus 19, and then the second half mirrors the content of the first half from that turning point. This view is highly significant, because it makes Lev 19:2 the central keystone of the whole book. That is, ‘You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy’ is the guiding theme of the entire book of Leviticus, and Leviticus is at the heart of the description of God’s restorative purposes for his people.

This is music to the ears of holiness people! We might be tempted to say, ‘We told you so!’ to the commentators. But, we holiness people need to take care before we boast. The English translation of this verse (and of 1 Peter 1:15-16) obscures something that the King James Version did not (but which ignorance of Elizabethan English also obscures). The KJV says, ‘Be ye holy...’. ‘Ye’ is the now lost second person plural form. The command is not, as we have constantly preached it, primarily to the individual. The command is to the people of God, the community of faith.

We also need to note that this commanded holiness is not a ‘thing’ we are to have—nor even an experience. Rather, it is the *imitatio Dei*, the community of faith living as the image of God, as God created humanity to live.

With these two structurally central factors in mind, we can see that keeping Torah is the means by which relationship with God and within the people of God is lived. It helps to explain the ‘law’ aspect of the Torah. The laws of the Pentateuch are descriptive of how the people live in relation to each other, and so to God. When these instructions to human living are followed, they are living righteously, and doing what is just. The result of righteousness is *shalom*, peace.

⁴ Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, Oxford, 2001; followed by Jacob Milgrom, particularly to be seen in his three volume commentary in the Anchor Bible series by Yale University Press.

To summarise what we have been trying to say thus far. We are arguing that the narrative of the Pentateuch reveals that God's plan for redeeming humankind to full relation to himself, and the restoration of creation to his loving purposes is through a people of his making and choosing. This people is to model righteousness and peace to the whole of humankind, as the shining example of what God intended for his creation, and for himself. The end of Deuteronomy finds this people at the Jordan River, poised to enter the land of promise. This open-ended conclusion to the Pentateuch leaves the question, 'Will God's people fulfill their promise?'

When we turn to the New Testament, we need to see how God's purposes do not change. That is, the Old Testament is not God's 'Plan A' that failed, and so he instituted Jesus as 'Plan B'. Rather, Jesus Christ has always been the goal and fulfilment of God's purposes. Therefore, much more than considering the Old Testament narrative to be irrelevant, we need to see how God's actions in Christ bring this narrative to fruition.

Community of transformation

We have taken some care in spelling out the Old Testament case both because it is perhaps a less familiar approach to many, and because it is such an important foundation for looking afresh at the New Testament. Before turning directly to the New Testament, however, it is worth setting the context within the Second Temple Judaism⁵ into which Jesus is born.

One can still hear people talking about the 400 years of silence that lasted between the end of the Old Testament canon and the New, between Malachi and Matthew. Apart from the questionable dating of both Old and New Testament books in such a viewpoint, and its monochromatic focus on canon, the vast array of literature that survives from this period of time—not least in the discoveries in the region of Qumran—reveals a cacophony of voices vying to be heard throughout these centuries. When we look at this literature, we hear the conversations that were taking place at the time of Christ, and the conversation partners of the New Testament writers. Most of what survives can be described, perhaps anachronistically, as theological, in the sense that there is an overarching concern to understand and explain their contemporary situations in the light of the past, and that past is defined largely by

⁵ 'Second Temple Judaism' is the term used to refer to the historical period from the rebuilding of the Temple in the Persian era down to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, but here we refer particularly to the two centuries or so before the birth of Christ.

Scripture, the law of Moses. By the time of Jesus, any group that wished to be of influence within Judaism had to legitimate its actions in a direct line from the story of God's purposes for his people, beginning at least with Abraham, and as revealed at Sinai.

And what we find as we read the literature of this time is that they express their understanding of the people of God in terms of purity and holiness. All the religious groups of Jesus' time were orientated to the Sanctuary and the presence of God, and thus all were 'holiness' groups. The Sadducees, as the priestly leaders, naturally saw themselves as the keepers of the Sacred Place. The Pharisees, a lay movement, sought to live their daily lives at the level of purity that would allow them entrance to the Sanctuary at every moment. The Essenes,⁶ rejecting the Temple hierarchy, sought to live in community as a Holy Place, and when they met together they became the Holy of Holies. Even the Zealots were concerned for holiness; their uprising was an attempt to cleanse the Holy Land of the impurity of the Romans.

The Jews of Jesus' time expressed the priorities of their daily lives in the language of purity, a purity sufficient that constantly acknowledged God at the heart of their existence, and that prepared the way for the worship of God in his holy place, and in the holy land.⁷ Notably, this system of purity required increasing degrees of separation from that which was declared to be unclean.

It is in this setting that we must read the New Testament, and particularly the Gospels. Jesus creates the new covenant people of God, as a holy community fulfilling God's creation purposes. The Church embodies this holy community.

Each of the Gospels presents this picture in a different way, but it can be seen most clearly in the Gospel of Matthew. In the early chapters Jesus is presented as fulfilling in himself the purposes for which God had intended his people. From his birth to his early ministry, his life recapitulates that of Israel: Going down to Egypt, being called out of Egypt, his exodus at the Jordan river, forty days in the wilderness, then coming to 'the mountain', where he gathers a people around him. In this way Jesus 'fulfils all righteousness' (Matt 3:18) as was expected of Israel (Deut 6:25). He appears to be a second Moses, calling a new people

⁶ This term includes the community known from the texts found in the area of Khirbet Qumran.

⁷ In every case, perhaps, we can point to political and social explanations for the differentiations of these groups. Regardless of the 'reality' of the politics of the day, the fact is incontestable that any political legitimacy had to be expressed in terms of purity, even if it translated into ethnic cleansing.

of God together (with 12 leaders), with a new law, the law of love (so, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Great Commandments).

The significance of this narrative is that, on one hand, Jesus embodies in himself the obedience to the Father at the very points where the people had failed. By his obedience the people of God may learn obedience. On the other hand, the narrative of Jesus encompasses his relation to his people. Their relation to him will be the source of their life. He is the Holy One in their midst. They are to be a holy people, the *imitatio Christi* which is the visible witness to the redeeming work of God in Christ.⁸

Jesus, however, by his presence as the Holy One in our midst, reverses the idea of holiness from separation to that of contagion. Jesus repeatedly meets people who should make him unclean (the leper, the haemorrhaging woman, tax collectors, ‘sinners’), but by his presence and his touch they are made clean and whole. Thus, holiness is no longer something to be protected from the profane, but which encounters the profane in order to make it holy, too. The place for God’s people to be holy is not in separation from the world, but in reaching out to the world. The Church does not fear contamination by the world, but reaches out to bring transformation.

The same can be illustrated throughout the New Testament. The same expression of God’s purposes for his people in language of purity and holiness has long been explicated by holiness people. At this point we may simply draw attention to the corporate nature of this expression. Whereas Paul, for instance, does remind believers that their bodies are temples of Christ (1 Co 6:19), he more often speaks to the church as a whole as a temple (e.g., 1Cor 3:16-17; and particularly Eph 2:21, as another expression of the new humanity in Christ). His use of the image of the church as the body of Christ is another way of expressing the relation between Jesus and his people we have described in the Gospels. The body is holy by integral relation to the Head, Christ. The Church is the body of Christ in this world, Christ to the world. It is in and through the Christ-likeness of the Church that the world sees Christ and is transformed by Christ.

Both these images come in Paul’s correspondence with the church in Corinth. I once suggested to a group of pastors that, rather than being viewed as a problem church, Corinth should be thought of as the ‘perfect church’. It is the only church Paul makes the particular point of calling sanctified (1 Cor 1:2: ‘to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints’)! To be sure, it was full of troubles, but they were the kind of problems that arise from a church that has embraced the world for its transformation. The glimpse we get of this church set down in a city of heightened

⁸ This has been given full expression by my colleague, Kent E Brower, in *Holiness in the Gospels*, Kansas City, 2005, and so needs only allusion here.

paganism is a possible paradigm of how a holy church works. People become ‘saints’ just as they are, not expected to be ‘perfect’ before being allowed into membership, and within the community of faith they are transformed through the holy life of the people of God. Perhaps it is an exaggeration to call this ‘perfect’, but it is a biblical depiction of how the church is holy even when individuals do not yet know what that means.

Imagining a holy church

We may now come to make some observations from this narrative that address our theme. We have attempted to highlight the essential communal emphasis of the Scriptural narrative. The modern emphasis on the individual for the understanding of salvation, while an important development of the awareness of the personal implications of the gospel, has served in the West to obscure the primary focus on the place of the people of God, of the Church. The biblical authors write in terms of ‘us’ and ‘we’, rather than ‘I’ and ‘me’. Evangelicalism, inclusive of the Holiness Movement, has emphasised the ‘I’ to the dilution of the ‘we’ to such an extent that there is little sense of engagement with the Church. The innumerable offshoots of Evangelical churches, each doing what is right in their own eyes, is enough evidence of this.

But emphasis on individual salvation, and individual holiness, has reduced holy living to the personal journey through life. How this relates to the mission of God is seldom considered. Even the term ‘holiness evangelism’ works out in practice as a call to personal salvation using holiness language. Let me clarify, this presentation is not attempting to replace the importance of personal holiness with a social holiness; it is trying to reorder the priority of the personal and the social in view of God’s creation purposes.

What if we, as a holiness church, lived as though how we live together is the purpose for our existence? If we see ourselves as a people with the Holy One at the heart of our existence, the expression of God’s creation purposes being lived out in this present evil age, for the sake of the redemption of God’s world?

Firstly, the local congregation, when viewed from these biblical models, is to be the visible local expression of redeemed humanity and humanity being restored, living together in light of God’s creative purposes—always for the sake of the whole of creation and not ourselves. As such, the church is not simply a number of people trying to live their own holy lives, but in their shared life are the model of God’s holy people, who love God and one another, which is *shalom*. This *shalom* is lived out in the rough-and-tumble of the clash of the Kingdom of God with the kingdoms of this world, and the reality of the devastating effects of sin in personal lives. The church embraces the sin-sick, as they are, enveloping them within the love of Christ in the fellowship of believers, and healing flows. Inside the temple.

The particular focus of this paper is the intersection of biblical theology with local church life, in which holiness is understood beyond traditional individualistic concepts and permeates all aspects of church life. The local community of faith is the primary expression of the presence of the Kingdom of God breaking into the present age. Beyond the local church, however, this has significant implications for how the local church relates to other churches. Firstly, as a denomination, in which connectedness is of vital importance, and the call to holiness is our reason for existence, this narrative compels us to expand our grasp of what sort of holiness that calling entails. In this narrative, holiness is not the goal; cleansing and Spirit fullness is not the end of salvation. Holiness is the requirement for service that flows out of the relation to the Holy One in the midst of his people; service that swells out of a redeemed and transformed community.

Of course, the Church of the Nazarene is not the only expression of the Church that exists, though too often we have acted as though we were. If it is difficult enough to conceive of a holy church that embraces sinners within it, it is by far more difficult to conceive of how the rambling, contentious conglomeration of people who call themselves Christian around the world can be holy.⁹ We may wish to dismiss a large percentage of these ‘so-called’ Christians as ‘nominal’, or even deluded. But we have to accept, in the light of this narrative, that we are family, even if often estranged. Rather than de-Christianising other forms of Christianity, we would do well to see ourselves as our early church leaders did, existing for the sake of the rest of the Church, calling her to holiness. Not as those who are ‘already perfect’, but for her own sake, and the sake of him who loves us, and gave his life for us.

In my lifetime our church has repeatedly anguished over our identity in changing times, and in the face of very limited impact on the world around us (let’s be honest here). Perhaps part of our difficulty is that we have defined holiness in such narrow terms that we have fallen short of the glorious potential of our calling. If our identity as a holiness people lies in a particular doctrinal expression of a moment in time when holiness begins, then our world is just too small. If our identity lies in God’s full redemptive purposes, we have a world of grace to explore!

⁹ Standing in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is an epitome of this conundrum. All the people jostling for a place in that odd structure, often actually assaulting each other, is, nevertheless, somehow the Church of Jesus.