

# I

## GOD'S THREE-FOLD PURPOSE FOR THE CHURCH

*Before we get into how to do church, let's look at why. Why did God invent the church? Scholars have advanced various ideas. My own thinking goes back to the very beginning, and it builds on the way Jesus most often referred to God: as Father. Don't worry if you disagree with some of my ideas. The practical points in the rest of the book will help you anyway.*



# GOD IS A FATHER AND THE CHURCH IS HIS FAMILY

**Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. – 1 John 3:2**

## The Family of God

I have sometimes considered developing what I call a “theology of fun,” based on the idea that God created the universe just for the fun of it. Certainly nobody could force God to create! But I think there must be more to it.

Let's start at the beginning. Not Genesis 1:1, *In the beginning when God created*. . . . I want to get behind that, to why God created. To do that we have to look at God himself.

How many ways can you think of that God is described in the Bible? God is great, God is just, God is holy, God is good, God is merciful. God is our refuge and strength and salvation. God is a spirit and a consuming fire. All these are descriptions of God. But one verse is not a description, it's an equation. 1 John 4:8 says, *God is love*. **Love is God's essence. It's who God is.**

What is the greatest characteristic of love? Love wants to share. It's a

relationship. **Love must be shared, or it isn't love.** That doesn't mean it has to be reciprocated, but there must be one who loves and one who is loved.

Since eternity, God has shared love in the Trinity. One of the most basic understandings of Christianity is that there is only one God, but this one God exists in three persons: God the Father, God the Son (who came to earth as Jesus), and God the Holy Spirit. Without this community of divine persons to share love, God could not be love.

God, who is love, has been sharing love since eternity. But God's love is not only eternal, it's infinite. It's overflowing. God's love wanted to overflow the Trinity.

What provides the greatest opportunity for an ongoing expression of love? A family - different personalities living together, adapting to each other, adjusting to each other, caring for each other, putting each other first. A family creates infinite possibilities for love. So God decided to create a family to share his love, with God and with each other.

God could have created us so that we had no choice but to love him, but that wouldn't be real love. God could force us to act like we love him, but that wouldn't be real love. **Love is only real if it is freely given.** God wanted to share real love. So God gave us free will.

Unfortunately, our free will doesn't just give us the opportunity to freely love God. It gives us the opportunity to cause a lot of trouble as well. We see this in the very first human beings God created.

Adam and Eve shared love with God for a time. Genesis 3 implies that God used to enjoy walking with them in the Garden of Eden. But one day they exercised their free will to disobey God, and that time of innocent family fellowship was broken.

*They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" – Genesis 3:8-9*

**God experienced the heartbreak of a father whose children turn against him and get lost in the world.** Adam and Eve's disobedience broke up God's family. The whole rest of the Bible records God's plan throughout history to bring his children back.

For a while God tried to relate to the whole growing human race, but they turned from God and became so wicked that God had to destroy them all in Noah's flood (Genesis 6-8). He tried again with Noah's descendants, but instead of trusting God, they built a tower and put their trust in it. They were unified, but not in God. To keep it from happening again, God confused their language, and the human race scattered across the earth (Genesis 11).

**So God changed strategies.** He decided to relate in a special way to one group of people, who would get to know and love him. Then they could invite the rest of the world into God's family. God chose the children of Abraham, the nation-family known as the Hebrews, Israel, or the Jews. King Solomon understood. He prayed at the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem, *that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel* (2 Chronicles 6:33 ESV).

## God's Desire

God's desire has always been to live among his people. When Israel wandered in the wilderness, God told Moses, *Have the people of Israel build me a holy sanctuary so I can live among them* (Exodus 25:8).

When the Hebrews conquered the Promised Land and started living in houses, God approved David's plan to build a house where God could live. It was called the Temple, and God filled it with his presence (2 Chronicles 6:1). For the next thousand years, a series of temples in Jerusalem were the focus of God living among his people.

Unfortunately, **somewhere between Solomon and Jesus the Hebrews lost their understanding of what it meant to be God's chosen people.** They forgot God chose them as messengers to invite the whole world into his family. Instead, they began to believe God chose them to be the only members

of his family. Instead of welcoming other nations, they scorned them.

So God started again, with Jesus. But this time membership in the family wasn't by genes but by choice. The Bible says, *Abraham's physical descendants are not necessarily children of God. Only the children of the promise are considered to be Abraham's children* (Romans 9:8). The "children of the promise" are the church.

**The church – all people, of Jewish or non-Jewish descent, who put their faith in Jesus – is now the family of God.** And our loving Father has commanded us to bring as many people into the family as will accept the invitation. When we do that, we become the fulfillment of God's desire to live among his people. *Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you?* (1 Corinthians 3:16). *Where two or three gather together in my name, I am there among them* (Matthew 18:20).

God so longs to live among his people that when we die, God takes us to live with him until the end of time. And at the end of time, when everything is put the way God wants it, where will God live? With his people. *I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them"* (Revelation 21:3).

God is not looking for a place to live in. He has that in heaven. **God is longing for a group of people to live with.** God's plan in creating human beings was that we would be his family. Fulfilling that plan is what the church is all about.

## Three Purposes

Like any father, God desires a home where he can rest and be himself. Like any father, God desires to raise up children who will be like him. And because God is the ultimate and infinite Father, God desires for his children to bring other people to become part of God's family – ideally, every other person in the world!

These three desires of God show us the three purposes of the church.

First, the church exists to **create a loving family home** where God can rest and be himself. *Now arise, O Lord God, and enter your resting place* (2 Chronicles 6:41). The way we do this is traditionally called worship.

Second, the church exists to **raise God's children** to be like their heavenly father. *Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children* (Ephesians 5:1). The way we do this is traditionally called discipleship.

Third, the church exists to equip God's children to **bring other people** into God's family. *Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 28:19). The way we do this is traditionally called evangelism.

Everything we do as a local church – in fact, everything we do as Christians – should contribute to fulfilling one or more of these three purposes. How do your church's programs stack up? Anything that doesn't help advance one of these purposes is an unnecessary drain on the church's time, energy and resources that can hinder our ability to do things of eternal value.

The next three chapters will look at these purposes more closely.

## Points to Remember

- God created people to share his love as a family.
- God's desire is to live with people as a father lives with his children.
- The church exists to create a loving family home where God can rest and be himself.
- The church exists to raise up God's children to be like their heavenly father.
- The church exists to equip God's children to bring other people into God's family.