

What is the Role of the Church in the End Times?

“Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”

These words spoken by Jesus appear four times in the Gospels. Each time they are a conclusion; to a parable, an interview, and a teaching. The words appear in the incident with the rich young man (Matt. 19:30; Mk. 10:31); they conclude *The Parable of the Workers*, (Matt. 20:16) and summarise the truth about the feast in the kingdom of God (Lk. 13:30).

First means the earliest, the best, the most important and prominent. Last means the final place, the worst in value or the least in importance. Not only are Earth's values not reflected in heaven, they are transposed. The person, who has to be or thinks they are first here, will be last in heaven. The one who seeks prominence here will have little prominence there. The person who seeks promotion and rewards in this life will have fewer rewards in the next. No one has exclusive rights to the kingdom.

Read Matthew 19:30 – 20:16

We are rewarded by grace

The workers hired at 6 am were amazed to see those recruited at 5 pm being paid first and receiving a full day's pay. When it was their turn to be paid they expected to receive more (Matt. 20:10), but were disappointed. They began to grumble as Israel had done in the wilderness (Exod. 16:2). It is a short step from disappointment to resentment. We don't want to travel that road.

The landowner said, “Take your pay and go” (Matt. 20:14), literally, “pick up your pay”. This implies one or more of the 6 am workers had refused to take their pay from the table or had thrown their money to the ground in disgust. Whatever the case, their attitude soured the occasion and spoiled the success of the day. Our attitude in life will determine our altitude; our heart will determine our height.

The landowner was obliged to pay the 6 am workers a full day's pay. His obligation to those he hired later was simple, “I will pay you whatever is right” (20:4). He was under no obligation to pay them a full day's pay, but the man chose to be generous; a word frequently used to describe God's nature and quality of kindness.

There are several truths here. Firstly, the End Times applications of this parable reinforce the theme of *The Parable of the Talents* (Matthew 25:14–30) that is, Christians are to be active and diligent in serving the Lord; ***get busy!*** Secondly, the end-time harvest will be so immense that an ever increasing number of workers will need to be recruited, prepared and released into the harvest. Jesus instructs us to “Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field” (9:38); ***get praying!*** And finally, the new recruits have to be welcomed into the harvest field without criticism; we have to ***make room*** for other workers.

We transition by grace

It was really difficult for those who were hired first, to accept as equals those who were hired last. The 6am recruits declared, “We have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day” (Matt. 20:12). It is not uncommon in church life to hear, “I’ve been a deacon in this church for 30 years; it’s ***my*** job!” “I’ve played the keyboard here all my life; someone has taken ***my*** place.” “Someone is sitting in ***my*** seat!”

*We must always remember it is **His** church
and we are labourers in **His** vineyard.*

It was difficult for the Jerusalem church to accept that Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:1–3, 18) or they could be saved without first becoming Jews (Acts 15:5). Some Jewish believers were reluctant to accept Paul preaching the gospel to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:7–11). New wine is a hazard to old wineskins; grace is needed for both the wine and the wineskins to survive.

It has been said that Christians who were the product of one revival become the fiercest critics of the next revival. But the end time harvest will be so large and the time so short, we must embrace and make room for everyone.

We are included by grace

“People will come from east and west, north and south, and take their places at the feast in God’s kingdom. Some who are last will be first, some who are first will be last” (Lk. 13:29–30).

Israel thought they had sole rights to front row seats at the feast. Some Christian denominations think the same! But this attitude fails to appreciate that the plans of God are beyond our understanding; and the dimensions of his kingdom far surpass our thinking.

There are surprises and reversals in the kingdom. Those called first, the people of Israel, are placed last; those called last, people from the ends of the earth, are placed first. This is the mystery; the gospel makes Gentiles “heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:6).

What is the role of the Church in the End Times? Resisting
“You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world” (Matt. 5:13–14). Salt is a preservative with purifying qualities. Light is attractive and dispels darkness. This is not just what the Church does, it is what the Church is. Here are two fascinating paragraphs in 2 Thessalonians.

“Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, don’t become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying, the day of the Lord has already come. Don’t let anyone deceive you, that day will not come until ***the rebellion*** occurs and ***the man of lawlessness*** is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.” 2 Thess. 2:1–3

Clearly the early church was anticipating the return of the Lord to occur in their lifetime but they were mistaken. God’s plan includes a global harvest and Paul identifies that two things must occur prior to Lord’s return. (1) There will be “a rebellion”, the word means apostasy, backsliding, or departure from the faith. (2) The man of lawlessness or the antichrist will be revealed.

“Now you know what is holding him (*the man of lawlessness*) back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who holds it back (*preventing, restraining*) will do so till he is taken out of the way. Then the lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and the splendour of his coming.” 2 Thess. 2:6–8

Two identities are mentioned, (1) the man of lawlessness, whose power is already at work; the power of the Antichrist is active in the world but his person has yet to be revealed (1 John 4:3). (2) The ‘Restrainer’ who is unnamed. Various suggestions have been made to his identity such as the Roman Empire, the rule of law, the Church, the Holy Spirit. Because the Bible does not say, we can only make suggestions. Because the Antichrist will be a spiritual entity, spiritual force is required. It may be that the ‘Restrainer’ is the Spirit-filled Church. The role of the Church in the End Times is to be salt and light to the world that restrains the Antichrist.

What is the role of the Church in the End Times? Recruiting

The Parable of the Workers has one focus, recruiting more workers for working in the vineyard. There is a sense of urgency in the parable; this creates the impression that the workers are not planting or pruning, but harvesting the crop. Everything that happens in the life of a local church should have an underlying connection to evangelism. The Church exists for the harvest.

By 5pm, there are a large number of workers busy in the vineyard, yet more workers are still required. The landowner has already hired workers at 9am who were “standing in the market-place doing nothing” (Matt. 20:3). At 5pm he asked those, “Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?” (20:6). How can Christians stand idle when we are living in the days of great opportunity?

All the action takes place on the same day within a 12 hour period. Should we liken this day to the age of grace, with 6am being the birth of the Church and 6pm the return of the Lord, then the last hour is one of intense activity. More workers still need to be recruited and more harvest needs to be reaped.

Discussion

“Everything that happens in the life of a local church should have an underlying connection to evangelism.” If the Church exists for worship, discipleship, fellowship, evangelism and service (community involvement); how can we connect these ministries to evangelism?

Worship _____

Discipleship _____

Fellowship _____

Evangelism _____

Service _____

Matching quiz.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. The need of the harvest | A. The Lord |
| 2. The time of the harvest | B. More workers |
| 3. The heart of the harvest | C. Great |
| 4. The owner of the harvest | D. Now |
| 5. The size of the harvest | E. Kindness |

Next week, session 6, answers the question, “What happens when a Christian dies?” and considers the Rapture, Return and Resurrection.

Here are some suggestions of how to integrate evangelism into every area of the church.

Worship

1. Make the public worship meetings inclusive and welcoming towards visitors. Non-Christians can experience God's presence in times of worship.
2. Develop a prayer list of the names of people who need salvation and pray for them frequently.

Discipleship

1. Hold an on-going new Christians class.
2. Train people in how to be effective in evangelism

Fellowship

1. Make fellowship events open to those outside the church
2. Hold pre-evangelism events

Evangelism

1. Conduct 2-3 evangelism events each year
2. Plant, or partner in the planting of a new church
3. Ensure missions funds have a focus on planting churches in unreached communities

Service

1. Some service activities such as Food Banks frown on any expression of evangelism; however, add the names of the clients to the prayer list.