

Contents

Section I: Returning to Our Primary Purpose

1	Our Purpose, Our Opportunity.....	1
2	How Love Makes Everything Work.....	13
3	e Local Church Needs You!.....	23

Section II: Making It Hard to Go to Hell From Your City

4	Focus on the Absolutes of Scripture.....	35
5	Promote the Ministry of Christ and His Word Above Our Own Mission or Method.....	45
6	Pray to Raise the “Water Level” of the Holy Spirit’s Activity in Your City.....	57
7	Appreciate One Another’s Respected Interpretations of Scripture.....	73
8	Practice Supportive Speech and Actions Toward Others.....	81

Section III: Seven Power Points of Lifestyle Warfare

9	Living in the Tree of Life.....	97
10	Practicing Forgiveness.....	109
11	Becoming a Servant.....	121
12	Showing Respect.....	129
13	Cultivating Character.....	139
14	Praying From Heaven.....	155
15	Communing With God and Confronting the Enemy	165

Conclusion: Heaven or Hell?

Our Generation. Our Choice.....	181
Notes.....	189

—Section I—

RETURNING TO OUR PRIMARY PURPOSE

Our bookshelves are full of Christian books and videos. We have churches on every major street with more sta people than ever before, large Sunday school departments, cell group systems, and megachurch seminars. We have Christian bumper stickers, political action groups, huge parachurch ministries, and extensive social programs. We have built huge churches, ministries, universities, and homes—and in the midst of it all, we are not adequately impacting our culture.

We have beautiful seminaries, wonderful libraries, and scholarly theological analysis. People in some churches are laughing, resting in the Spirit, and vigorously interceding. Other churches are tired, broke, and bitter. Our own television, radio, and literature campaigns make us believe that we are making a difference. And our prophets tell us that we are—but the statistics don't.

It's time for a levelheaded, Spirit-dominated, Bible-based return to our primary purpose. It can be done. This book provides the proof.

- Section I explains our purpose and the opportunities of our generation working through the local church to impact cities.
- Section II reveals five proven principles that can be used anywhere to cause the body of Christ to be more effective.

YOUR PRIMARY PURPOSE

- Section III stresses biblical virtues and teachings that are necessary to make the five principles work—I call them “lifestyle warfare.”
- The conclusion is the charge: we are the ones equipped and responsible for making a difference. And changing our cities is not only possible, but it is also easy (and natural for us as Christians).

—One—

OUR PURPOSE, OUR OPPORTUNITY

My phone would not stop ringing. I was answering call after call and letting others go straight to voice mail. It felt as if the whole day had been this way, and it wasn't yet noon! Frustration was setting in. I had been speaking at a pastors' conference in Baltimore, Maryland, and several projects back home in Colorado needed immediate attention. I am usually patient through busyness, but the morning had been particularly draining, and I had to catch myself to make sure I did not snap at the person on the other end as I said hello.

"Hello, this is Ted."

It was my assistant. "Pastor Ted, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon wants a handful of evangelical leaders to meet with him right away. We received his invitation today, and I wanted you to know as soon as possible."

I stopped in my tracks. What did the prime minister of Israel want with me?

As it turned out, a team of American representatives would be meeting with Prime Minister Sharon to discuss American views on the State of Israel. Sharon knew that American evangelicals constitute some of Israel's most avid supporters, and he wanted to make sure that our voices were heard in the ongoing discussion about Israeli policies.

The political importance was obvious to me, but still, it was an incredible moment. I was raised on a pig farm! I grew up in a modest town

YOUR PRIMARY PURPOSE

in the Midwest! And now the State of Israel wanted to fly me to the Middle East to meet with the prime minister.

It was not the only time in recent memory that I had been stopped in my tracks. Opportunities to speak with heads of nations and major figures in politics, finance, and the media had been—and still are from time to time—cropping up. In the last few years, evangelical Christians have been garnering a great deal of public attention. The issues that are closest to our hearts—protecting the weak (including the unborn), defending sacred institutions such as marriage, and advocating religious freedom for people all over the world—are front and center in national and international politics right now, and our perspective is being sought on a regular basis.

Many people talk about this recent phenomenon in terms of an increase in evangelical “power,” as if the goal of evangelical Christians is just to accumulate political capital and throw our weight around. Perhaps that is true for a few, but I think it misses our purpose entirely. We are not after personal power or fame. We do not have a personal need for attention, and we know that there is so much noise in the public debate of ideas that one more voice isn’t vital. But we as Christians fundamentally appreciate freedom—not just for ourselves but for all people, in all places, all the time, and as we grow, we see that there are constant and powerful forces that are working to deny freedom to others. So it becomes our role to speak up. Why? Because we are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. We are carriers of the message of freedom, justice, goodness, and life. As ministers of reconciliation between God and humanity, we have a role that no one else can fill.

If the rise of evangelicalism continues, and Christian influence continues to increase, that’s not just good news for evangelicals. It’s good news for everyone.

As I write, Pope John Paul II is being laid to rest in the grotto underneath St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. The media can speak of nothing else, and every major news Web site is updating with constant reports from Vatican City. The talk is of the pope’s phenomenal gospel-oriented work in the last quarter-century. He wisely used his influence

to help thwart Communism, defend the unborn, feed and clothe the poor, and embrace the world's youth. One of his early heralds to the world was, "Be not afraid!" He stood courageously against tyranny and encouraged Christians everywhere to adhere to traditional biblical principles. International journalists are recounting these issues right now, and as they do so, they have to contextualize the pope's significance for their audience. They explain what he represents to Catholics and how his life was dedicated to the public imitation of Jesus Christ.

The whole earth is contemplating the life of this man.

Now, it might seem odd to begin a book on contemporary evangelicalism with an observation about the pope, but we have entered a new day. I would not minimize the differences we Protestants have with the Catholic Church, but today those differences are not the point because the secular press is transfixed with the good works done by Pope John Paul II. The effect his life and death are having on the world and on people's perceptions of the gospel of Jesus Christ is pronounced. I love that this event is big news, because it means that observers the world over—even those who would prefer to ignore the importance of religion—are grappling with the effects of religious belief.

**I believe that we are living in the midst of
an unprecedented opportunity. We have
a chance to pursue our primary purpose
with newfound resolve.**

is, as you likely know, is the trend in world events. Though for decades many scholars and journalists believed we were entering a new era of secularism, it is now clear that people all over the world still take faith seriously. Evangelicalism's rising influence and the attention given to the pope's death are just two aspects of a trend that shows no signs of waning. Most major events since the turn of the century have been embedded in religion—presidential elections, wars, the democratic Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and more.

YOUR PRIMARY PURPOSE

Obviously religion is not always good news. Not nearly. Religion alone is not sufficient to spread liberty, promote justice, and enhance goodwill. But for those of us who have committed our lives to the completion of the Great Commission of Jesus, the fact that religion is in the air is good news, because it means that the gospel is never far from the conversation. It means we have abundant opportunity—more so than I have seen in my lifetime—to make statements of faith to ever-wider groups of people. It means we have a chance to represent the gospel on the world stage.

Several years ago, I wrote a book titled *Primary Purpose: Making It Hard for People to Go to Hell From Your City*. This book, along with three others (*Loving Your City into the Kingdom* by myself and Jack Hayford, *Taking Our Cities for God* by John Dawson, and *at None Shall Perish* by Ed Silvano), was used to encourage the City-Strategy Movement of the 1990s.¹ Now, a decade later, evangelicalism is impacting society in an increasingly public and substantive way, not just within individual cities, but within entire nations.

This book is a revised and updated edition of *Primary Purpose*. The basic principles outlined in the first edition still apply, and much of that original material will be left untouched. I have updated stories and broadened the horizons in some places to reflect current global concerns, but our primary purpose is now what it always has been. Still, things have changed in the last decade. I believe that we are living in the midst of an unprecedented opportunity. Again, we cannot take the current level of interest in religion lightly. The events occurring around us constitute a chance to pursue our primary purpose with newfound resolve.

What is our primary purpose? I believe it is to do everything within our power to ensure that every person alive today has an opportunity to respond to the gospel. Ours is the first generation since Jesus gave the Great Commission that has the ability to communicate the gospel to every person on the planet. This is our generation's reason for being.

A couple of years ago, the *Atlantic Monthly* ran a cover story detailing the rise of conservative Christianity in the Southern Hemisphere. Philip Jenkins argued that Christianity will largely define world

events throughout the next hundred years. “Christianity as a whole is growing and mutating in ways that observers in the West tend not to see,” Jenkins wrote. “For obvious reasons, news reports today are filled with material about the influence of a resurgent and sometimes angry Islam. But it is Christianity, in its variety and vitality, in its global reach, in its association with the world’s fastest-growing societies, in its shifting centers of gravity, in the way its values and practices vary from place to place—in these and other ways that will leave the deepest mark on the twenty-first century.”²

Regardless of how *Atlantic* readers might feel about this, you and I know that this growth is the fruit of Christian missions and ministry in recent decades. The numbers do not indicate precisely what the quality of growth is like—that is, it is hard to measure the actual strength of all these local churches and new believers—but without a doubt, God is working in the hearts of men and women all over the world, and His kingdom is advancing.

Take a moment and think about what this means. You and I are alive during the most significant spread of Christianity in history. God is doing something wonderful in the earth, and we are part of it. How should we live our lives in response?

LIVING LIFE ACCORDING TO OUR PRIMARY PURPOSE

There are three questions we must ask ourselves if we are to live our lives according to our primary purpose. These three questions are fundamental to our direction in life—they shape our worldview and provide a foundation for all the work that we do.

1. *Where are we in time?* There is a timeline from the beginning of the world through all of human history until now. Different times call for different actions and perspectives. Too many people get stuck in the past or addicted to thinking about the future. We need to understand the moment we are living in and act accordingly. Great leaders throughout history understood the importance of this question and answered it correctly. Moses, Jesus, and Paul knew what they

YOUR PRIMARY PURPOSE

needed to accomplish in their lifetimes. In the United States, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Ronald Reagan, and others changed the world because they accurately understood what needed to happen in their day. We need to know the most important features, issues, and concerns of our era and work for the kingdom with those realities in view.

2. *What is God doing in our generation?* Where is He moving? What is He saying? Where is the hand of God at work? Think of the great work Christians have done in the last sixty or seventy years—the establishment of the National Association of Evangelicals; the rise of Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Bill Bright, and many others; the Jesus Movement; the founding and strengthening of Christian colleges and universities; and more. We need to be a part of the very best work that God is doing in our generation. Think also of God’s hand in global or political events—the sacrifices people made to win World War II and work for victory in the Cold War, for example, have produced a world with expanding representative governments, free-market wealth, and the spread of civil liberties. All this happens in God’s timing, and it behooves us to be aware of what He is doing in the earth.
3. *What is our role in what God is doing?* This is where our thinking becomes actionable. What are we supposed to do with our lives? Where do we, as individuals, local churches, ministries, business owners, parents, students, and members of our community fit into God’s plan for this generation? If we know where we are in time and accurately know what God is doing in our generation, then we have context for our lives. We can know how to act with specificity and intentionality. We know what to do with money, influence, time, relationships, and organizations. We will not waste our lives in wondering what we are supposed to do; we will know, and our lives will have purpose.

These are “the big three,” and as you can see, answering them gives shape, direction, and meaning to our lives. In the following chapters,

Our Purpose, Our Opportunity

those questions will be in the background as you learn how to participate in all of our primary purpose. But before we move on to those important principles, let me offer some specific thoughts on where we are in time, what God is doing, and what we are called to do.

Of all generations in the history of the human race, ours may be second only to the first century a.d. in terms of potential for the spread of the gospel. The generation Jesus and His disciples lived in obviously changed the world forever, but have you ever considered the political and social realities that made that possible?

1. There was one superpower in the civilized world at the time—Rome.
2. Because there was one superpower, there was an extensive network of roads that provided opportunity for trade, which opened the door for the spread of the gospel. (The gospel often travels along routes of trade.)
3. Because there was one superpower, widespread communication was relatively easy.

Primarily because of these three facts, in the 150 years after the ascension of Christ, the message of the gospel spread so dramatically that Christianity was poised to become a global faith.

Now, let's look at our generation:

1. There is one superpower—the United States of America.
2. Because of this one superpower, pathways for global trade are opening. Again, trade opens doors for the gospel. When trade expanded to China, the church in China grew. When the Iron Curtain fell, the door was opened for trade, representative government, and freedom of religion; evangelicalism has since expanded throughout Eastern Europe.
3. Because of new technologies and the expansion of trade, global communication is easier than ever before. As a result, the gospel can be communicated more easily.

YOUR PRIMARY PURPOSE

ese are the major issues of our generation. It is absolutely crucial to recognize and embrace these realities, because Christians often get confused about where we are in time. The massive success of the novels in the *Left Behind* series is an indication of just how much people are captivated by any discussion of our place in history and how close we are to “the end.” In fact, I fear that our generation is distracted by constant predictions and the endless search for last things and that such distractions keep us from doing the work on the ground. The fact is, we are still here. And we have unprecedented opportunity provided to us by the sovereignty of God. Eschatological escapism will not accomplish God’s goals in the earth. Accurately discerning the times and fulfilling His plan for our generation will.

What is our primary purpose? I believe it is to do everything within our power to insure that every person alive today has an opportunity to respond to the gospel.

Remember when Jesus talked to the religious people of His day about this? He told them, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘It’s going to rain,’ and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘It’s going to be hot,’ and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present time?” (Luke 12:54–56). Jesus was telling them that they did not know that they were living at the most pivotal moment in human history. They had the Savior of the world among them, and they did not realize it.

You and I cannot let that happen to us. We need to know what God is doing around us and why. We must not be distracted.

DISCERNING THE TIMES

Scripture is fairly clear about how we will know the end is near. Matthew 24:14 says, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in

Our Purpose, Our Opportunity

the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” I cannot say when the Lord will return, but I do believe we are living at the cusp of this verse. We are alive in a generation that is monumentally crucial to God’s plan of salvation for humankind. We are developing the tools to communicate the gospel to every person on the earth. We could actually see the completion of the Great Commission.

Think about the markers of our generation:

1. We are experiencing the most massive growth of the church in history.
2. We are enjoying the greatest unity among Christians in over four hundred years.
3. We have greater resources available to the church than ever before.
4. More people live in nations that have constitutional protections for freedom of religion than ever before.
5. We have greater ease of travel worldwide than any previous generation.
6. We can communicate worldwide with greater ease and efficiency than in any previous generation.
7. We are coordinating unprecedented global prayer events.

Consider all this, and use it to frame the era in which you are living. Discern your times. The dominant world trends right now are opening the door for the fulfillment of the Great Commission. This is not the time for us to cower. This is the time to read our Bibles. This is the time to build churches. This is the time to pray. This is the time to press forward and advance the kingdom of God. This is our hour. With the rising influence of evangelicals around the world, the spread of Christianity throughout the Southern Hemisphere, and the increased pursuit of democracy and religious freedom throughout

YOUR PRIMARY PURPOSE

the world, God is working in our time, and we need to be a part of that work.

» » » » »

We are alive in a generation that is monumentally crucial to God’s plan of salvation for humankind.

» » » » »

No doubt, there are negative developments as well. I don’t deny the darkness that exists in the world. No question, there is a great deal of work to do. But God is working. Recently in *Christianity Today*, columnist Andy Crouch told a story of a ministry that is serving people in extraordinary ways. He wrote about a teenage girl named Elizabeth in Southeast Asia. Like too many young girls in that part of the world, Elizabeth was tricked into leaving her village by the promise of a well-paying job, and she ended up being forced into prostitution. For seven months, Elizabeth was trapped in a brothel and repeatedly raped.

But a Christian ministry called International Justice Mission focused their efforts on Elizabeth’s situation, and they persuaded police to raid the brothel. Andy writes:

When they arrived, they found that Elizabeth had written on the wall in her own language: “Ps. 27:1. The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?” There were dozens more Scripture verses on the wall of Elizabeth’s room—or, more accurately, her cell—all written by hand, taken from the Bible she read when not being forced to serve customers. But Psalm 27—describing the psalmist’s trust in God even though “evildoers assail me to devour my flesh”—was what Elizabeth’s rescuers saw and remembered.³

The story of Elizabeth is but one of thousands of stories that could be told about the work that Christians are doing throughout the earth. World Relief, the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, is often at the forefront of relief efforts wherever natural

Our Purpose, Our Opportunity

disasters or massive human rights violations occur. Similar organizations are working in virtually every corner of the earth, planting churches, building schools, and feeding the impoverished. Christians are also working strategically in places of political and cultural influence, including centers of art and entertainment from New York to Hollywood to Paris, leading academic institutions in the United States and abroad, and so on.

Encouraged yet? Clearly, I am no doomsayer. But neither do I have my head in the clouds. We have a lot of work ahead of us. People walk away from God every day. People make poor decisions and give their lives over to sin. The fact that evangelicals are being discussed does not mean that we are liked—in fact, it often means just the opposite.

The fact that churches are being planted throughout the world does not always mean that those churches will survive or that they will be healthy, life-giving churches. We face threats from the rise of Islam, the popularity of religions such as Mormonism, the distracting power of consumer culture, and more.

But the Spirit of the Lord is moving. There is work to be done, and now is the time to do it. This is our primary purpose.