

IS OIKOS BIBLICAL?

BY TOM MERCER



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The Oikos Movement

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011.

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“You’d think I would have discovered something, that is evidently that big of a deal, much earlier than year 23.” - Me

At least 95% of the time, people who give their heart to Jesus actually give their heart to Jesus because of the primary influence of someone in their oikos. That’s a flat-out staggering number. And, evidently, an important one to recognize. But I lived 23 years before I ever heard it.

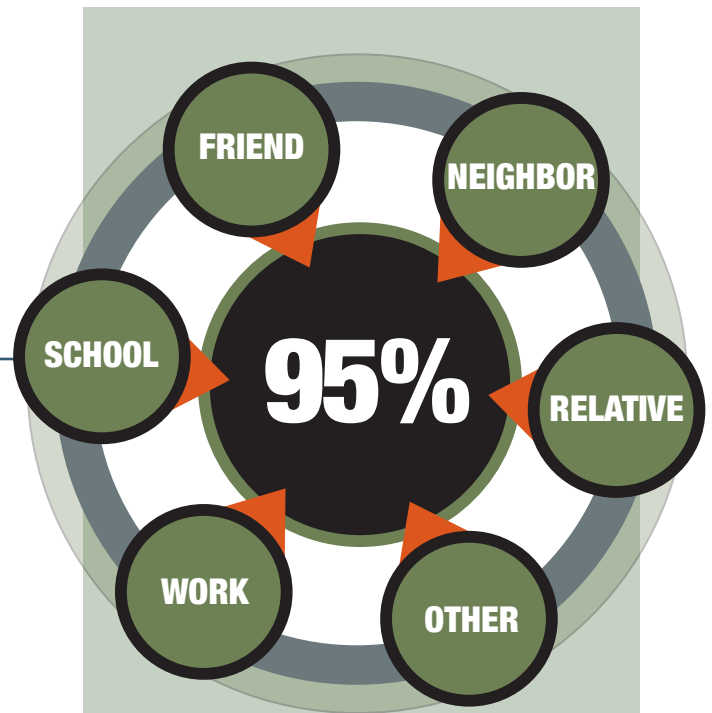
During those 23, I grew up in a great ministry family, attended a well-respected Christian university and seminary, and served in a vocational ministry role for several years. So, yeah, I understand why people wonder if the oikos principle is biblical. When I first heard about it, 45 years ago, it was even a shock to my system. I mean, being immersed in “church world,” my entire life, you’d think I would have discovered something, that is evidently that big of a deal, much earlier than year 23. But, come to find out, it had been staring right at me in the pages of the Bible all along.

So, this is dedicated to anyone who questions the biblical veracity of the oikos principle. Maybe you’re one of them. Maybe you too can’t believe you’d discover something so important so late in the game. If so, I invite you to hear me out.

Oh, and welcome to the club!

THE OIKOS PRINCIPLE IS ON PURPOSE.

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” - Romans 8:28



oikos n, extended household (Gr.)

1. the most natural and common environment for evangelism to occur
2. a group of eight to fifteen people with whom you share life most closely, your sphere of greatest influence
3. the people for whom God wants to prepare you to become an ideal instrument of His grace
4. a microcosm of the world at large, for whom God sent His Son—that all who place their faith in Christ would be delivered from the bondage of sin and enjoy life to the fullest

Romans 8:28 is one of the most prolific verses in all of Scripture. It's probably been tagged as the "life verse" for more people than most any other passage. But it's interesting how we tend to ignore the most important part of Paul's statement, the "his purpose" part.

We love verses that talk about good things happening to us. We love verses that talk about how much we love God. But verses that talk about God's purpose in history tend to fade into the background. Not for all, certainly, but for many, to be sure. We find it very easy to make every passage somehow about ourselves. Even the return of Jesus! This may surprise some people, but the timing of Jesus' return is not first about *our* being rescued. It's primarily about the lost, and *their* prospects to actually be able to join us on that great Day!

The Second Advent of Christ should always be on every believer's mind. But the turmoil in the Middle East gives His coming a renewed focus. And that should be expected. As time goes on, the world gets crazier. And as the world gets crazier, our longing grows for a Day of Judgment for the godless and salvation for the faithful. We love the thought of Jesus restoring order. Have you ever thought (as I have), "Lord, I just don't see how this world can hang on much longer!" So, that begs the question. *Why does it?*

Peter weighs into the conversation with a few Spirit-induced thoughts about Jesus' return.

"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

- 2 Peter 3:9

So, why does God allow all of this insanity and rebellion to continue? One word. *Purpose.*

God has a purpose in history. It frames the theme of Scripture. It framed the reason God sent His Son to Earth. It framed the reason Jesus decided to build His Church. It framed the reason He gave us

the Great Commission. And it frames His rationale for not yet returning to clean the mess we've created. Therefore, Paul reminded the Romans, it should also frame our plans for the coming day when we wake up every morning.

Seeing the oikos principle in the Bible goes well beyond looking for a singular word. When you get your head around God's purpose for history, you can then start to understand God's purpose for your own life. Jesus-followers are intentional because we follow a very intentional Jesus. He came to turn lost people into saved people. In the middle of everything that happens globally, no matter how depressing it might be, God is still at work fulfilling the same purpose, the greatest initiative in human history, the redemption of humanity from our sin.

Actually, rather than hoping Jesus would come sooner and save us from all the chaos, maybe we should hope He waits a little longer, because someone in our oikos is still lost.

When we connect God's historic purpose with the clear data associated with *how* He continues to accomplish that purpose, you would fully expect the oikos principle to bleed through every section of Scripture. So, I guess it should not surprise us that it shows up so often!

Jesus came with a clearly-stated purpose. To make it happen, He engineered a uniquely compatible process, centered around the oikos. All that to say (and to paraphrase Romans 8:28), God has great things in store for those who make it the highest priority of their lives to focus on that great cause.

T HROUGHOUT HISTORY, GOD'S PURPOSE HAS BEEN CLEAR.

"Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth: "May you prosper greatly! I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel. For he is the living

God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions.”

- Daniel 6:25-27

God’s historic purpose, to redeem the world from sin, indeed bleeds through every part of Scripture. It’s in every story and every precept.

For example, when you consider the Daniel narrative, you quickly notice that the man who wrote the book isn’t really ever the center of attention. His experience frames the course of the narrative, so we (those of us who grew up in church) have been taught to simply focus on what happened to him. Granted, he and his three Jewish friends are supposed to represent us, but what happened to those four God-fearing men is not the reason the stories are so compelling. Their experiences were simply the means to the greatest end of all, the people around them were changed. When the dust settled at the end of each of their stories, it’s what has happened to the people in their oikos networks that clearly mattered the most. For example, Chapter 3 is not about God saving Daniel’s three friends from the fiery furnace any more than Chapter 6 is about God saving Daniel from the jaws of the lion. Those are simply events that set the table for the real story, which is about God turning lost people into saved people.

I cannot overstate this. We tend to look at the Bible in such a self-focused way. We look at the trials of our lives and say, “Oh Lord, save us like you saved Daniel from the lion’s den” or “Lord, save us like you saved Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace!” We say those things because we’ve been *trained* to say those things. I mean, how many times have we heard, even taught, with that as the big takeaway. “*God saved those guys from their crisis, so God can save you from your crisis too*”? It’s so easy to find a way to spin the Bible into something that’s always makes life easier for us.

I believe God actually can save us from our crises, and often will. So, understand, I’m not saying that’s not also a key theme for many of those stories. But we’ve all read them a hundred times without perhaps noticing that the spotlight actually shines on Ashpenaz, the chief of the royal court officials; Nebuchadnezzar, the undisputed ruler of the known world; Arioch, the commander of the King’s guard; the Queen Mother who was the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar; Belshazzar who was the last King of Babylonia; and Darius who was the King of Medo-Persia. (Okay, that’s not 8 to 15 people, but Daniel’s trying, so let’s be patient with him!)

Once you open your eyes to the oikos principle, you never read the Scriptures the same way again.

The week after preaching from Daniel 6 (this has been a few years ago), I received an email from a member of our church family who, after a very emotional day, took the time to share this. I have his permission to share it with you.

“My dad was diagnosed with colon cancer recently and had to go through an aggressive surgery to remove a large tumor in his colon. In the two months that have followed, he’s been back in the hospital several times for more surgery and words such as “metastasized” have begun to be verbalized by physicians, much to our disappointment. Because I am the oldest child, it falls on me to lead in prayer when our visits with Dad are over, so as we walked into church and my wife mentioned that we were at the part about the lions in the study today, I began to formulate in my mind a prayer about my Dad’s cancer. That the cancer itself was like the lions and my Dad, being a faithful Christ follower, like Daniel, and that God could close the mouth of the cancer and heal him. Well, the presentation on Sunday brought me to my knees. The challenge of being humble before the Lord our God and learning that it hasn’t been and never will be about us, but about what our influence is going to be to the unbelieving around us.

So later in the day when our family of ten were standing around my Dad's bed in our yellow gowns and blue latex gloves, singing hymns of the faith, using a grandkids ipad to make sure we got the words all right, and leading my Dad in a worship of praise service, all I could think of was who we were supposed to influence for the Kingdom through this seemingly overwhelming challenge my Dad is going through right now, and who were watching while it was all going on as our voices were wafting into the hallway of the hospital wing with words more powerful than most had heard that day.

Later, when it was time for me to lead in prayer, even though I did ask God to intervene physically for my Dad, most of what I could pray was for us to be humble before the Lord and, even though confused and maybe a little scared, that we would be more concerned about praying for the doctors and caregivers that would be involved with our family and them seeing the power of our relationship with Jesus Christ (in dealing with what I feel is a very worldly disease), and who was going to be impacted for Christ because we have allowed ourselves to be impacted by Him along the way."

I was humbled and amazed by his words. Oh, the power of purpose! Yet we so quickly default to seeing our experiences, and reading Bible stories, through that lens of, "How does this benefit me?" instead of seeing that opportunity through a "How can this fulfil God's purpose in the world?"

For years, I've been on record as saying there are no non-oikos passages in the Bible. That's still my take, and I'm sticking to it!

THE PROCESS IS AS OBVIOUS AS THE PURPOSE.

"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst." - The Apostle Paul (1 Timothy 1:15)

So far, I've introduced the oikos principle's placement in Scripture by elevating two elements, (1) the preeminence of God's historic purpose to provide salvation for sinners and, thereby turn lost people into saved people, and (2) the ridiculously high percentage of believers who give credit for their salvation (first to God, of course, but also) to the primary influence of someone in their oikos.

But the idea of oikos is much more than an indirect inference in the Bible. It is mentioned clearly, directly, and often. You could say that the *process* is as obvious as the purpose!

For example, after healing the demon-possessed man, Jesus told him to, "*Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.*" (Mark 5:19) The Greek word translated "your own people" is oikos.

After Zacchaeus gave his heart to Christ, Jesus said, "*Today salvation has come to this house.*" (Luke 19:9) The Greek word translated "house" is oikos.

When Jesus healed the son of a royal official, "*he and his whole household believed.*" (John 4:53) The Greek word translated "household" is oikos.

When Jesus called Levi (Matthew) to be His disciple, it says, "*While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.*" (Mark 2:15) The Greek word translated "house" is oikos.

When Cornelius showed interest in becoming a Christian, the angel told him that Peter would be paying him a visit. "*He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.*" (Acts 11:14) The Greek word translated "household" is oikos.

When Paul planted a new church in Philippi, the core group God provided him included a business-woman and civic employee. It's interesting how Paul, God's ambassador to the Gentiles, was used to communicate the Gospel to both. But as soon as

Philippi enjoyed an indigenous, albeit new Gospel presence, the *oikos* principle kicked in and started firing on all cylinders.

“When (Lydia) and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home.” (Acts 16:15) The Greek word translated “household” is *oikos*.

“At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized.” (Acts 16:33) Once again, the Greek word translated “household” is *oikos*.

I could go on, but it’s not just the noun form of the word that tells the story in the Greek New Testament. In so many well-known New Testament challenges, some form of the word *oikos* frames part of compound Greek words, adding *oikocentric* character to the meaning every time it shows up.

For example, in Ephesians 3, Paul passionately delivers a description of the massiveness of God’s love. *“That Christ may dwell (katoikeo) in your hearts through faith.”* (Ephesians 3:17) The English “dwell” is a combination of *kata* (down) and *oikeo* (home). It refers to a state of comfortability. The challenge is to welcome the love of God into your life as you would welcome a close friend or family member. He wants God’s children to become uber comfortable with the power of God’s love. So comfortable, in fact, that we’d have enough faith to show the same level of love that God showed us, even to those who have offended us.

Another example is Colossians 1:25. *“I have become its servant by the commission (oikonomia) God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness.”* The Greek *oikonomia* is another compound term, this time combining *oikos* (house) with *nomos* (law). Paul’s point is that God has given each of us official (evidently, even legal) influence among a specific and relatively small circle of people. The English word *commission* accurately frames the intent of the statement.

The Bible is an incredible collection of documents. I continue to hold to its inerrancy, its infallibility,

and the historic verbal plenary view of its inspiration. But, years ago, when I was confronted with the power of the *oikos* principle, I more clearly understood that, through every story and precept, the love that God has for people stood out. God truly *so* loved the world that He sent Jesus to save the world. The Bible is clear. We don’t just *go* to church, we *are* the Church! And we’re here for the lost.

The Bible has value at a lot of levels. Paul made that clear to Timothy.

“From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

- 2 Timothy 3:15-17

Yet every “good work” has a purpose. In fact, they all have the same purpose. Ultimately, they all point to one thing. We don’t follow Jesus just so He would bless us and make us happy. Through us, God wants to show the world there is only one true God, through whom everyone can experience prosperity and purpose. Good works lead to holy living. And, “without holiness, no one will see the Lord.” (Hebrews 12:14)

Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Plain and simple. Paul told Timothy that he viewed himself as the one who needed God’s saving grace the most. It may be fair to assume that the perfectionism that made him a Pharisee of the Pharisees, also haunted his imperfections as an Apostle. Yet he so highly valued the role good works played in helping people see Jesus in us.

“Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.”

- Mark 5:19

We all have a story about how Jesus changed our lives. And whereas, storytelling *connects* people to the mission we’ve been given, God’s Word *prepares*

people for the mission we've been given. That's why we study it deeply and often.

PREPARATION IS VITAL FOR A SUCCESSFUL PROCESS.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

- Acts 2:42-48

Coaches everywhere agree. They hope for a legitimate shot at the championship of their respective leagues, to be sure. But, that aside, regardless of the level or the sport, every time their teams suit up, coaches are focused on one thing. On game days, they want to put the best team possible on the field or on the court.

That's why they call practices, watch film, try to motivate their teams with all of those fiery pre-game speeches, and work tirelessly to create a positive team culture. It's all strategically designed to bring the best out in all of their players.

Every day of the season and for much of the off-season, they're preparing their teams for one thing. Actually, the main thing. *Game day*. The day when the fans will all be watching!

When you think about it, at most games we attend, what we hear isn't very relevant. Neither is what we touch, smell, or taste (Concessions excluded, of course). The reason we attend games or turn on the television is to watch!

Why is that? Well, like I've said so often, just follow the numbers and you'll eventually get to the truth! And here's another interesting number. 91% of the sensory receptors in our brains are committed to just one of our senses. The other four senses share the other 9%. That's not just interesting. It's why the human threshold for being convinced that something is true is overwhelmingly dependent on what we see. Not what we hear, or smell, or touch, or taste, but what we can see. We were engineered by our Creator to *watch*!

That's why we bring people together for fellowship and accountability. That's why we teach the Bible. That's why we come together for worship. The Great Commission is about making disciples. But to do that effectively, Jesus wants the best product on the field, simply because all of our worlds are watching us.

For decades, I've told pastors that the oikos principle is as much about discipleship as it is about evangelism. They're shocked! They thought all we had to offer them with that principle is a simpler evangelism program.

But, keep in mind, coming together to learn more about God, enjoy Christian fellowship, and worship together is supposed to be purposeful. None of them are an end to themselves. As we read the Book of Acts, they evidently never have been. In fact, the truth is, we'll be better at each of those things about a second after we all croak. That's what I mean by saying they're all purposeful.

The Church's earthly purpose has to be something we won't be better at when we're in Heaven! So, what is it? (Here's a hint: there won't be any lost people in Heaven.)

So, let's read that passage again. And, this time, notice how it's a list of what the Church did when they came together as a church.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.”

But then notice *why* they spent so much time together doing those things. They were preparing for the most important thing. It’s in the very next verse.

“And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” - Acts 2:48

When the believers came together, they prepared together to fulfil the Church’s purpose, which has always been to see lost people become saved people. And not just on Sunday, but *daily!*

I could come up with a variety of reasons to faithfully attend church, but they all boil down to this. The people in our oikos have been genetically engineered to watch how we live. Not to feel us, or taste us, or smell us. Or even just to hear what we claim to be true.

God has always wanted to get the most out of His team. He wants to put the best product on the field today and every day. People need to *see* Jesus. So, let’s all go to church this Sunday and listen carefully to what we hear. Let’s take notes. And not just sit there, but sing with our worship leaders. Engage with our church families. Get the most we possibly can out of the experience. Do all the things we need to do to better *prepare* for the *process* that fulfils the *purpose*. Because the rest of the week matters.

People are watching. And, more often than not, they deserve a better depiction of Christlikeness than they may have gotten out of us last week.



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