

CHAPTER 9

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THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

One of the clearest directives Jesus has given us is known as the Great Commission. We read in Matthew 28:18–20 that we are to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded. For the church to fulfill this important task, we must be willing to go wherever the Lord asks and serve in whatever way he directs. We’re not alone in this endeavor, however, as the Lord has given us the Holy Spirit to empower and equip us to accomplish this exciting mission. There is no greater adventure on the planet than to be part of the expansion of God’s kingdom on earth. The purpose of this study is to help you catch Jesus’ vision for the world and to assist you in fully embracing your calling as a disciple of Jesus – to make disciples for Christ in your Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

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Who doesn't want to change the world?

Funny thing: When I was in college, we thought we were a revolutionary generation and were sure that the world would be changed with our efforts—not just changed, fixed! Now I hear the same thoughts from younger generations. Evidently my generation didn't do so well on our watch.

Underlying this desire is a sense that there is something wrong. Exactly! The Christian understanding is that there is indeed something wrong. We read in Genesis that our race fell and fractured the world. It's now a fun house of mirrors that reflect distorted and even grotesque images. The world we now experience is both funny and tragic. We need a “fixer;” in religious terms, a “savior.”

As Christians we believe that Jesus Christ is that “fixer/savior.” Jesus, by means of his death, resurrection, and ascension, has addressed the fundamental problem, sin, and now his fixing/saving work is moving forward to consummate that renewed world in which all is as it is supposed to be.

My desire to see the world fixed—myself included—is a constantly fresh source of love for Jesus Christ and for his church. I haven't always loved the church. At one time I considered it irrelevant, old fashioned, and a source of worldwide conflict. After the summons of Jesus to believe, I discovered the church as a place of care and inspiration; I had to set aside my prejudices. Now I believe that the church is the means of changing/fixing the world, and I count it a privilege to be a part of the community and to be a part of its mission.

The word *church* brings up a variety of images, thoughts, and feelings. Perhaps you think of the church as a place where you go to worship on Sunday; perhaps it's a white colonial building with columns or a stone gothic edifice or a ramshackle wooden building out in the country. The church in which I serve was built in the sixties with jalousie windows and linoleum tile; we are currently updating it! Our church is quite nervous about the huge box church several miles away. It was once a Home Depot and has been renovated to accommodate thousands.

Maybe you think about people when you think about the church. When I look out on Sunday mornings, I see pews filled with mostly gray-haired people who wear suits or nice clothes. Our congregation is nervous about that bigger church where one sees few gray hairs and dress is casual. Maybe you have warm feelings that bring back childhood memories of Sunday school. Maybe you have bitter feelings as you think about the preacher who ran off with somebody on staff.

Whatever you see or think about when you hear the word *church*, it most likely isn't big or rich enough to accommodate God's picture and purposes for the church. If you are to take your place in God's work of changing/fixing the world, your thoughts of the church need to be stretched.

John Stott notes that:

The church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought. It is not an accident of history. On the contrary, the church is God's new community. For his purpose, conceived in a past eternity, being worked out in history and to be perfected in a future eternity, it is not just to save isolated individuals and so perpetuate our loneliness, but rather to build his church, that is to call out of the world a people for his own glory.¹

What would an expanding vision of the church look like? In the book of Acts, and elsewhere in the New Testament, I see that a vision of the church includes the following themes: (1) the community of Jesus Christ, (2) the community of the Holy Spirit, (3) a missional community, (4) a redemptive community, (5) a learning community, (6) a worshiping community, and (7) a heavenly community.

THE COMMUNITY OF JESUS CHRIST

Jesus creates the church, is the center of the church, and has a purpose—a mission—for the church.

The Greek word for church is *ecclesia*. It means the “called out ones.” As described in the New Testament, the church is composed of those who have been called out of the former way of life and are called into close relationship with Jesus Christ.

I used to picture the church as a huge room filled with people. Jesus was way up at the front; I could hardly see him. Everyone was facing forward and didn't even know that I had slipped into the vacant seat in the back row. It is strange that I thought that way, because it does not reflect my experience or theology. I had a clear sense of call when I entered the Faith. The first disciples were called; all that join the church thereafter are called as well (Eph. 1:4–5, 11–13). Jesus has a seat, not at the back of the church but right up front, with our name on it. It is a seat of honor. He knows we are there. He has put us there. The church is Jesus' church, and every single one of us is there for his purposes.

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THE COMMUNITY OF THE SPIRIT

Jesus rose from the dead and for forty days taught the disciples, commissioning them to be his witnesses as the next phase of fixing/saving the world (Acts 1). Their mission was not to commence until he sent them the Holy Spirit. Jesus' gift of the Spirit to the church at the feast of Pentecost endued his church with supernatural power and gifts. Both the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit are present throughout the letters to the first churches (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12–14; Eph. 4:12–14).

Since biblical times this spiritual and supernatural nature of the church has frequently become obscured. Annie Dillard observed that on a given Sunday morning ushers pass out bulletins to sleepy people who shuffle to their seats; if people knew what the church was really about, ushers would be passing out crash helmets and life jackets!

Some churches, notably Pentecostal and charismatic, are more aware of this supernatural nature of the church than others. I am a Presbyterian, and our commitment to doing all things “decently and in order” keeps us from being eager for dramatic manifestations of the Spirit. It's a good thing that the Holy Spirit is not limited to the spontaneous and spectacular. The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, etc. (Gal. 5:22–23)—are character traits. The gifts of the Spirit include acts of compassion and mercy, teaching, and even administration. I find it interesting that two of the most Spirit-anointed people in the Scriptures were Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon, indisputably world-class administrators. We Presbyterians like that.

So is it spectacular spontaneous manifestations or orderly conduct? What really marks a church in which the Spirit is present? If we take the birth and growth of the church as our standard, it is when there is something within the church that spills out the windows and doors, flows down the street, and infects people with the life of Jesus Christ.

A MISSIONAL COMMUNITY

The arrival of the Holy Spirit brought a celestial sound and light show (Acts 2:1–13). The church's worldwide growth that began here spread throughout the Roman Empire and has continued to grow, through all of time into all cultures and languages. Jesus expected that his church would grow, and it has. Jesus, Lord of the Church, is behind it all. What amazes the people visiting Jerusalem at Pentecost was not just the sights and sounds but this: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?” (2:7–8).²

The gift of the Spirit brings the reversal of the Tower of Babel, described in Genesis 11. The community of Jesus Christ, the Spirit-filled community, is the beginning of God's new society that will experience the removal of the curse—a community moving away from chaos.

The gift of the Spirit means that the message of Jesus is “translatable.” The gospel can be spoken into the language, even the “heart-language,” of any people group, culture, or country. This translatability means that mission of Jesus Christ doesn't need to be restricted to some authorized version, whether it be the Greek, the Latin Vulgate, the King James...

Missional is the word used since the 1990s to clarify the centrality of mission in a world that has become post-Christian. The word *missions* had been used in the nineteenth century to focus the established church beyond the horizons of Christianized Europe and America. *Mission* is what people did if they left their home country and went “over there,” to darkest Africa, India, China, etc. Now that the secularized movement of the Christianized nations has resulted in “post-Christendom,” the church on every block in every community is engaged in mission—not “over there” but “right here.” This missional emphasis is leading to all kinds of creative and innovative ministries, some of which the more traditional churches find questionable. The missional task of the church today is moving from being a religious institution in a Christian culture to being a converting community in a post-Christian culture.

A REDEMPITIVE COMMUNITY

Peter preached his first sermon (Acts 2:14–41), and three thousand people were added to the church. The church went about incorporating those first converts and continued to grow. Their activities included the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (2:42).

As a redemptive community, the church is a community of the saved. It is also a saving community. Converts experience salvation by participating in the life of the church. In spite of my many misconceptions, prejudices, and emotional needs, a little Baptist church in Florida welcomed me “home.” That is, I was invited to homes for dinner and generally loved on. They taught me, nourished me, and put up with me. Immersed in their expressions of the love of God, I learned to believe, and my character began to develop. Hospitality and incorporation, then, are marks of a redemptive community. As we are engaged in mission, we not only “go and tell,” but we also invite to “come and see.”

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A LEARNING COMMUNITY

The first converts “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). Education is an essential ministry, as converts need to learn how to think and act as followers of Jesus Christ should; it does not come naturally. Jesus makes teaching central to mission. We see this in his Great Commission, in which he instructs disciples, “... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). The apostle Paul articulates the educational mission/ministry of the church: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2).

The church from that time to this has placed a high value on education. Those who sought to join the church attended classes twice a week for three years before they were allowed to be baptized. There were many great teachers in the first centuries of the church, Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) being the undisputed greatest. When Christianity was illegal and persecuted, one reason the church prevailed was that it “out-thought the pagans.”

The high value of education of the mission/ministry of the church can be traced through the creation of the great universities and public and parochial school systems of Europe and the United States as well as the mission schools of Asia and Africa.

Our little church is attempting to recover the value of education. We have a Bible study or two available every day. The pastors’ activities, which include counseling and administration, now include teaching in small groups and larger classes. In a secularizing culture, Bible illiteracy is on the rise, and there is a corresponding loss of a Christian mind and character. If the church does not excel as a learning community, we too may be secularized!

A WORSHIPING COMMUNITY

Another of the essential activities of those first converts was worship. They prayed together (Acts 2:42); they also met together in the temple courts (2:46) and even in their homes, praising God (2:47).

Worship was and remains a central focus of the church. Worshiping God is what the church does. A church wouldn’t be a church if it didn’t worship. The Protestant churches I am in touch with have one worship focus a week: Sunday morning with at least one service and maybe more. A few have a worship service in the evening, but not many. There are times when I envy Catholic churches in which it is common to have a daily worship service.

Worship is not generally conceived as an act of mission, but it is. We are created and converted so that we can, in the words of the Westminster Catechism, “Glorify God and enjoy him forever.” During the Dark and early Middle Ages, monks and missionaries used worship as a means of reaching the Norsemen, Frisians, and uncivilized invaders. This missional aspect of worship was rediscovered by the “seeker church” in the 1980s. Sunday morning became a primary means of outreach to those drawn by the rays of the church’s light.

I have been in churches where people attended worship, and I have been in churches where people worshiped. There is a difference. The way the hymns are sung, the sermon is heard, and God is engaged is noticeably different. The biblical account of the first church indicates that people were enthusiastically engaged in worship, in the temple, in the homes, in various ways. As a worshipping community was central then, it is essential now.

A HEAVENLY COMMUNITY

While the church on earth is moving through time, it is confined to neither time nor space, for that matter. In Christ, death does not terminate life or membership in the church. In Christ, death is not a barrier nor a cul-de-sac but a bridge into another side of existence.

Robert Markus, a historian of the early church, notes that early Christians knew that:

They were pilgrims in this world, aliens in the society of their pagan fellows, but they knew they were part of a vast community which is now traveling on its journey, to join that heavenly church ... The worshipping community here on earth was an outlying colony, its prayer a distant echo of the perfect and unceasing praise offered to God in heaven by his angels and his saints. It was especially in its worship that the apparent distance between the earthly and the heavenly community was bridged.³

In considering the church on earth and in heaven, it is common to speak about the visible and invisible church. The visible is the church we can see; the invisible church includes those we can see and those in heaven we can’t see. The church on earth is still engaged in spiritual warfare—the church militant. The church in heaven is the church triumphant. In heaven, the mission of the church is complete as it wholeheartedly enters in a worship that we have only tasted here. In an unrestrained manner they are “glorifying and enjoying God forever.”

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The book of Revelation gives us a glimpse of that heavenly community at worship.

“Day and night they never stop saying:

*‘Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty
who was, and is, and is to come.’ (4:8)*

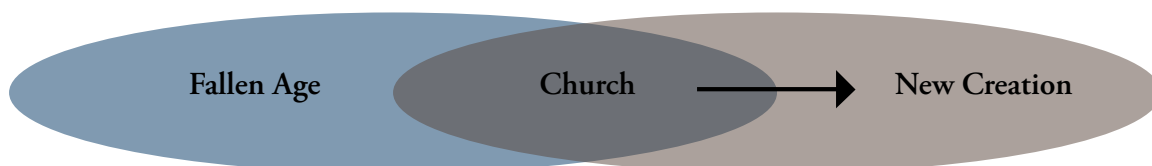
*‘You are worthy, our Lord and God
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.’” (4:11)*

The Celtic Christians used to speak of “thin places;” that is, places where the membrane, the veil, between heaven and earth was thin, where it was possible to see and hear the sights and sounds of the heaven shining through. I have found worshipping churches to be such thin places. I hear more music than the choir makes and hear words in sermons that resonate with a depth beyond the skill of the pastor.

CONCLUSION

If we think of the church as a building, a meeting, a series of activities, or a group of people with gray or not-so-gray hair, our experience of church could be enriched if we were to expand our vision of the church to stretch back to the first believers in Acts or outward to the brothers and sisters in heaven.

We are part of a vast community that stretches through the ages and extends into eternity. We have an important role, as we are the means by which God is breaking down the barriers between heaven and earth. God is renewing and restoring his creation as we believe and obey his Son. Talk about changing the world—we get to be in the action!



But of course there is a question: If Jesus really did fix/save the world and church is the community of the fixed/saved, then why is the world still the way it is? Wait, there is more! The church lives in the intersection of two ages. The Fallen Age has not yet been abolished, but the New Creation, the kingdom of heaven, is begun.

The church, as the agent of Jesus Christ, has the essential task to bear witness (Acts 1:8) to what is and will one day be. Saints, in the early centuries, were men and women who made the world to come seem present. At present, we are part of the church militant, and we are engaged in battles inside us, and in our culture, by forces seen and unseen. More often than we like, it seems that we are retreating rather than advancing. Despite appearances, we, the church of Jesus Christ, are God's agents for fixing/saving the world. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus"! (Rev. 22:20 KJV).

NOTES

¹John Stott, *The Living Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 19.

²Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*, 1984.

³Robert Markus, *Rome to the Barbarian Kingdoms* in John McManners, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 73.