

Starting at the Ends: Called-Out Ones
Mark 1:1, 14-20
Isaiah 42:5-9
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Meaning of “church”

“Here is the church; here is the steeple; open the doors, and see all the people!” When I heard the word “church” as a child, this is the image that came to my mind: a building, a specific building, Community Presbyterian Church of Mt. Prospect. And within that 1960s stone and cinder block building, a particular room: the blond-wood sanctuary, peaked at the ceiling, with pews all lined up neatly on the floor; a holy room, where the minister’s voice – Gil Bowen’s at the time – boomed in sonorous and holy tones. This is what church meant to me then, as a child.

What does the word “church” mean to you? When you think of church, maybe you think of this beautiful place with all its gorgeous stained glass windows. Or maybe it means the place you get your spiritual lift each week in worship. Maybe when you say church you think of the place you volunteer on committees or in mission projects like sorting rummage. Maybe church evokes for you the place you got married, or had your babies baptized, or bring your children for Sunday School. When most of us think of “church” we think of a particular building, where particular things happen, on particular days, especially on Sunday.

Today I want to press the point that how we think of church – what we mean by church – makes all the difference in the world.

As I’ve said in my recent newsletter articles, when the earliest followers of Christ called themselves “church” they didn’t mean the building where they gathered; in fact, until the fourth century, most of them didn’t

have particular buildings set apart for worship and study – they met in each others’ houses. Nor did “church” mean the activities they did together: by calling themselves “the church” they didn’t mean the “ones who study Scripture,” or “the ones who pray together,” though they could have named themselves that. No, the earliest followers of Jesus chose to name themselves this way: as *ecclesia* – literally, “called out ones.” And I wonder what it would mean for us to claim that meaning for today.

Missional vs. Vendor church

Now as you know from recent newsletters, some shorthand has developed to describe the way these different meanings of church play themselves out today: “missional” churches are those that think of themselves primarily as “called out ones,” in contrast with “vendor” driven churches that think of themselves in terms of the activities and benefits that happen in church buildings. Let me say the obvious: no single church is ever completely “vendor” driven or “missionally” driven. Every congregation has elements of both. But what *most* drives *our* church? In order to assess ourselves, let’s take a closer look at what these alternatives look like. We’ll start with a vendor-driven church:

First, the purpose of the vendor-church is to meet people’s spiritual (and social, cultural, and philanthropic) needs. Leaders produce products like sermons, music, and Sunday School; in addition, like physicians or lawyers, clergy are the professionals to whom members look for advice. Members are consumers who shop around to meet their needs. If the church ceases to produce the products that members want, they go to a competing brand.

Second, success in vendor churches is measured in numbers: if the numbers attending worship, on the membership rolls, and in Sunday School

are increasing, it is successful; if they are decreasing, it is not. Evangelism becomes member recruitment; stewardship becomes fundraising.

Third, the vendor church's institutional viability is the point; members, like members of a co-op or a club, are expected to support the institution with money and as volunteers. Participation is motivated by a sense of obligation, peer pressure, social expectation, or, if those fail, good old guilt.

In sum, as pastor and scholar Eugene Peterson puts it:

“The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. We are preoccupied with shopkeeper's concerns – how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money. ... Religious shopkeeping, to be sure, but shopkeeping all the same.” (cited in Dykstra, p. 55)

This is the essence of the problem. As we pastors have adopted the identity as shopkeepers, our congregations have been turning into little corporations, and our members have been morphing into consumers. American churches of all theological stripes have increasingly become “vendor” churches; and ours, not surprisingly, bears a good deal of those traits.

What's the alternative? The “missional” church looks like this:

First, the purpose of the missional church is to be people “called out” by Christ to be his body, every day, in the world. The church isn't a place or even an activity. The church is *us*. And our identity is as baptized

individuals, marked by Christ as his own. As Rick Warren so baldly states it in *The Purpose Driven Life*, “It’s not about you.” It’s about Christ, and his incredible vision for our lives – not as consumers or money-makers or even students of spirituality, but as his ambassadors, as his name-bearers, as his reps.

Second, success in missional churches is measured by how faithful we are to Christ’s values. Sometimes that will draw great numbers; sometimes that may rub people the wrong way; sometimes it may even offend. I think of the Confessing Church in Hitler’s Germany, for example or the abolitionists in our own congregation in the 19th century, who were anything but popular. A missional church knows what it’s about and doesn’t worry about numbers.

Third, members of missional churches spend the minimum amount of time and energy to support the institution and the maximum amount of time and energy being Christians out in the world and then coming back together to praise God in worship, and to encourage one another in study and fellowship. The purpose of membership isn’t to serve on a committee; it is to help each other be equipped for ministry out in the world.

And finally, the pastors of missional churches aren’t CEOs or shopkeepers. I think it’s radically significant that during your recent interim period, long before I arrived, you changed the job description of your pastor/head of staff: this position is no longer CEO. You created the position of Executive Associate, quite ably held by Don Dempsey, who functions as the COO so I don’t have to. Now, instead of hiring yourself a CEO for your corporate church, you chose to call yourself a *pastor*. My primary function isn’t to run the organization; it is to coach you as individuals and as a group in your daily Christian walk out in the world. You have chosen, in essence,

to call at the head someone who will lead you more and more into a missional stance in the world.

Potential impact on status quo

By now if you're paying any attention at all, you're getting the picture that this shift in our church identity may have major implications for the status quo. Now, there are two ways of looking at this: the most radical is this: if we were to start from scratch, what would a church shaped by these ends look like? But a second approach is more useful: if we were to look at all the things we're doing now, which ones would promote this vision of church? What would we need to add? And what could we trim down or even eliminate in order to create time and resources for the things that matter most?

Let me offer a few concrete examples.

We could start by deciding who we are called to be in our daily Christian life – what our essential purpose really is. Our Long Range Planning Council is suggesting three Great Ends or purposes for our individual and corporate Christian life: to be messengers of the good news; to be justice-makers; and to provide a community of nurture. Everything we do would be assessed through the lens of these three Great Ends.

Next, we would need to take a hard look at our committees and Boards, and strive diligently to reduce the amount of “busy work” and bureaucracy. What if committees only met when they absolutely needed to? What if we trimmed the number of people serving on committees and Boards to only the number of people absolutely necessary to get the job done? What if we realized that some of what we do *doesn't* serve those three Great Ends, and we decided to eliminate some activities and committees

altogether? Like so many congregations in America today, we are accustomed to a 1950s corporate model of how to run an organization. It's not a bad way to be. But it serves to feed the *institution* while it starves its own members.

Don't get me wrong! We still need infrastructure! We still need some who will serve on Finance and Personnel and Buildings & Grounds. We still need programs! We still need some who will plan and teach Sunday School and lead the youth and host the Friday Lunch Bunch and organize our mission and service opportunities. But the goal of membership isn't serving on a committee; the goal is growing in faithfulness. And the mark of faithfulness isn't the time or money we give to First Church; the mark of faithfulness is giving everything into God's hands – daily work, investments, love for family, care for the stranger. And the means of faithfulness is to spend more time studying the Bible and sharing ...to find ways to discern daily life as an act of faith ... to reflect together what our faith leads us to think and do about our investments and our politics and our parenting and our philanthropy.

Potential benefits to our faith

Do you see the benefit to our faith? It's a radical idea; but what if we had much more time to come together on a regular basis in groups, to talk about the challenges of moral leadership in the workplace or raising unselfish children or how to navigate the ethical minefields of our profession or what on earth we're called to do as American Christians viz. the problems of poverty or Middle East peace? What if we spent our energy equipping ourselves with a deeper knowledge of Scripture, so we could turn to the Bible and listen to its internal conversations about family life or other religions or keeping the faith in a global environment? What if we spent

some time getting to know a few other people well enough that we could trust them with our struggles in life and questions of faith, and allow ourselves to get help not just from “professionals” but from those who “profess” their faith?

And what if we made worship the absolute center of our life together? Not so the musicians and the pastors can inspire you, but so that all of us, every single one of us, can give glory to God and plug into our “power source” again. In fact, in my opinion, worship is the only essential thing we do here, building our relationship with God and offering up our lives. Ideally, every single member of our congregation would take part in worship. ushers, chancel guild, communion servers, acolytes, liturgists, musicians, custodians, choir members, those who share joys & concerns, preachers, children who come forward, hearty hymn singers, heartfelt prayers, even coffee-hour hosts and participants who extend the fellowship of worship. I am convinced that when we make the worship of God the complete and total center of our church’s life, everything else falls into place. We remember who we are and why we’re here; we remember to whom we belong, and that we’re loved by God, and marked as Christ’s own forever; we remember where our hope and joy and life itself comes from.

Measure of success

How will we know if we’re getting it right? To the extent that we identify ourselves as “called out ones”; to the extent that we measure our success by our daily faithfulness; to the extent that we are ambassadors of Christ in our everyday lives; to the extent that worship becomes the center of our life together; to the extent that seek to fulfill our Great Ends – then we

will be the people of God we are truly intended to be. So it was among the earliest Christians. And so it is among us, Christ's followers today.

Model of apostles

Let me end by going back to where we started – with our gospel lesson – with Jesus calling out his first disciples. “It is an interesting thing about those people who became apostles,” writes church scholar and observer Craig Dykstra.

“It’s an interesting thing about those people They were in business for themselves – fishing, collecting taxes, holding households together – doing the things ordinary folk do to keep their heads above water and their hands out of trouble. Then something happened.

“They were called by someone and sent somewhere. And when that happened, everything changed. They saw themselves differently, went places they never thought of going before, thought thoughts that never in a hundred years would have come into their heads, and did things they never in their wildest imaginations would have seen themselves doing.

“Their world was turned upside down. They saw evil in what once had been business as usual, beauty and goodness in people and things they had scoffed at, scorned, or just plain ignored. Strangers became friends and enemies became neighbors. Called and sent – and everything was rearranged.

“[One pastor has said] that ‘a sense of mission is precisely a sense of having been sent’ (Albert Curry Winn, *A Sense of Mission*). And this, he explains, is the key to understanding the church, ourselves as individual Christians, and Jesus Christ. If we want to know who the

church is, we must see it ... as the 'sent people' of God – the people sent by God through Christ. And if we want to know who we are as individuals, we must ... see where it is Christ sends us. Then we come to know who it is we are.”

We are sent ones. We are called out ones. And I can't think of anyone else I would rather be. “Here is the church. Here are the people. Open the doors, and send ... send ... send *all* the people.” Amen.