

“The Called-Out Ones”
Mark 1:1, 14-20
September 11, 2011

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“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, the image that came to my mind was a building, a specific building, First Presbyterian Church of Glen Ellyn, IL. And within that 1950s New England style chapel lay a small quaint sanctuary, peaked at the ceiling, with pews all lined up neatly on the floor; it was a holy room, where the minister’s voice – my dad, Dr. Richard A. Dempsey – boomed in deep and holy tones. This is what church meant to me as a child.

What does the word “church” mean to you? When you think of church, maybe you think of this building, this beautiful sanctuary. Or maybe it means the place where you get your spiritual lift each week. Maybe when you say church you think of the place where you serve on a committee or volunteer for a mission project like our church’s garden or the weekly PAD’s shelter? Maybe church evokes for you the place where you got married, or where you had your babies baptized, or where a family member’s memorial service was held.

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.

When the earliest followers of Christ called themselves “church” they didn’t mean a 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.”

No, the earliest followers of Jesus chose to name themselves this way: as *ecclesia* – literally, the “called out ones.” I wonder what it would mean for us to claim that meaning today.

Lately there has been a “shorthand” that has developed to describe two different ways of looking at church:

1. The “Missional” church; “missional” churches are those that think of themselves primarily as “called out ones,” in contrast to
2. The “Vendor” church; vendor driven churches think of themselves in terms of the activities and benefits that happen in the church building.

Let me state the obvious: no single church is ever completely “missionally” driven or “vendor” driven. Every congregation has elements of both.

What do you think *most* drives *this* church?

In order to evaluate ourselves, let’s take a closer look at what these alternatives look like.

Let’s start with the vendor-driven church:

First, the purpose of the vendor-church is to meet people’s spiritual, 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 to 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 primarily in numbers: if the numbers of people attending worship, or on the membership rolls, and in Sunday school are increasing, it is successful operation; 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.

As pastor and scholar Eugene Peterson puts it:

“The pastors of America have transformed into a company of shop keepers, and the shops they keep are churches. We are preoccupied with shop keeper'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 shop keeping, to be sure, but shop keeping all the same.”

This is the essence of the problem. As pastors have adopted the identity as shop keepers, 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.

What's the alternative? To become more of a “missional” church.

What does that kind of church look like?

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. Our identity is sealed in our baptism, when we are marked by Christ as his very own.

As Rick Warren so boldly states 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 disciples.

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, I think of those in our congregation who decided to plant a vegetable garden in our front yard and this summer alone have harvested up to 500 pounds of fresh produce to help feed the hungry. I think of those who volunteer at our Pads shelter every week during the fall and winter season to provide food and shelter for the homeless here in the Palatine area.

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 supporting 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 service, study, and fellowship.

The purpose of membership isn't to serve on a committee, or to be eligible to be elected a church officer; it is to help, support, and encourage each other for ministry out in the world.

As Rick Barger writes in his book, "A New and Right Spirit, Creating an Authentic Church in a Consumer Society," the meaning of membership in a "missional" church is not about insuring that "my" needs are met, but insuring that God's needs are met! "Missional" churches are not consumer driven, but God driven!

And finally, the pastors of missional churches aren't CEOs or shopkeepers. The pastor's function isn't to run the organization; it is to coach, challenge, encourage, and lead church members as individuals and as a group in our daily Christian walk out in the world.

We are beginning the process of looking at ourselves; what are the things we are doing now, which ones promote our vision of church? What could we add or enhance?

What could we trim down or even eliminate in order to create time and resources for the things that matter the most?

These questions revolve around who are we called to be in our daily Christian life – what is our essential purpose and reason for being as we seek to Celebrate God, Grow in Christ, and Extend the Spirit. How will we know if we're getting it right? We will know:

- to the extent that we identify ourselves as “called out ones;” the ecclesia.
- 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;

Let me end by going back to our gospel lesson – with Jesus calling out his first disciples.

Church scholar and church observer, Craig Dykstra writes:

“It is an interesting thing about those people who became apostles,

They were in business for themselves – fishing, collecting taxes, and 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. A sense of mission is precisely a sense of having been sent. This 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 the "called out ones." And I can't think of anyone else I would rather be.

"Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors and send out, send out, send out, send out all the people."

Amen!