

Series: “The Church: 21st Century or 1956?” (Part 4)
“Is it *Members* or *Mission*?”

About 1800 years before Christ, the Living God appeared to a man named Abram in the town of Harran. Why God chose to reveal Himself to *this ordinary man, tucked away there in Harran*, no one knows! But that divine encounter sets in motion the whole story of salvation we read about in the Bible! Let’s look at where it all begins! “The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you’” (Genesis 12:1-3).

God says to Abram: I want you to leave your country and your relatives, and go to a land that I’ll show you. (God asked Abram to move, not telling him yet where he was going)! If Abram is willing to do this, God promises to make of Abram a great nation and to make his name great, and God also promises to bless him, and to make him such a blessing that all people on earth will be blessed through him.

Abram obeys God. He packs up and leaves. And the rest of the Bible is the written record of how God fulfills His promises to Abram, in spite of unbelievable obstacles that come up along the way. Even though Abram and his wife Sarai are way up in years and are childless, God gives them a son, and from his family line comes *Israel*, the people of God. God changes Abram’s name to “Abraham”, “father of many nations”.

Notice, the deal (the covenant) made between God and Abraham is that God will bless Abraham so that through him and his descendants, *the whole world would be blessed!* God’s creation of Israel wasn’t just *about Abram and his family line*. It was about the *people God wanted to bless through them!*

But if we read the Old Testament we see that time after time, Israel relished the fact that God loved them and chose them as His people, but they *forgot that the reason they were chosen was so God could bless and show His love to everybody*.

By the time of Jesus, Israel’s faith had become so skewed and self-centered that God’s people had pretty much lost their sense of mission to the world. Israel’s religious leaders (scribes, Pharisees, chief priests), believed God loved *them* because they tried their best to keep hundreds of religious rules and regulations – but that God didn’t have time for people on the outside who didn’t follow their religion. Because of their attitude, *again and again Jesus locked horns with these religious leaders*.

Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus associated with all kinds of people. He welcomed despised tax collectors and loose living prostitutes. He didn’t hang around the temple and synagogue and wait for people to come to “church”. He went to where the people were, and told them they too were loved and welcomed by God

I believe the church today is a lot like Israel of the Old Testament! Many congregations have

lost their sense of mission to the world. In the first message in this series, I talked about how so many congregations today are in decline – aging, dwindling in numbers, sometimes struggling for survival. ***I believe the basic reason many churches are floundering is because they are inwardly focused and have lost their concern for people outside the church!***

Many congregations are focused more on *members* than on *mission* to those outside the church. And if churches are to be renewed and revitalized, it has to begin with our forgetting ourselves and reaching out to the world. Jesus said, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:35). Those words are appropriate for churches as well as for individuals. Mennonite pastor and church planter, J. David Eshleman, in his book *Now Go Forward*, says: “In order to grow, congregations need to move from seeing the church as something for themselves to seeing it as the instrument of God’s mission.” *This church isn’t about you! This church isn’t about me! It’s about how God wants to use us to reach people with the good news of Jesus!*

You may say, “But Harry, are you saying that the needs of people in the church aren’t important? That we shouldn’t be taking care of the members?” No. I am not saying that. Believers already in the church need to be fed and nurtured so they can grow spiritually. We are to provide loving care for those hurting in the church. But I don’t know of many churches doing so much outreach that they’re ignoring the needs of their members! On the other hand, I know plenty of churches that spend most of their time, effort, and money just focusing on those already in the church! *Most congregations are much better at taking care of members than they are at winning lost people outside the church to Jesus!*

God loves lost people! God loves unchurched people! God has a heart that yearns to see people saved and come to know Him! Perhaps nowhere do we see the heart of God exposed more than in the story of the lost sheep. “So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:3-7).

Why did Jesus tell this parable? Because Jesus was being criticized for hanging around unchurched people! “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” (Luke 15:1-2).

The prophet Isaiah envisioned a time when Israel would come to their senses and fulfill God’s plan that she would become a light that would draw all nations to God: “I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6). Remember what Jesus said to His disciples: “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). The church is meant to be the light of Christ to world! We are not to hide the light under a

basket by just hanging around the church and associating with church folk!

Look at these words in 1 Peter, chapter 2: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; one you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10). These words describing the church were the same words used to describe Israel! We, like Israel, are a chosen race a royal priesthood, God own people! We are God’s special people for what? That we may enjoy the Lord and keep Him to ourselves? No! Rather, we are created to declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His light!

He some good news: Many congregations today are rediscovering their sense of mission to the world.

What might it look like when a church is functioning with a sense of mission to the world? When a church is focused more outward than it is inward? Here are just some thoughts and examples, in no particular order.

In an outwardly focused congregation, their budget and use of money will reflect outreach rather than just church maintenance. If you look at the financial records of a congregation and what they spend their money on, you can tell a lot about where the congregation’s values lie and where their heart is! Churches focused on mission and not just members will be giving their money away and trusting God to provide their needs!

Those attending will be inviting people to worship. This is so simple: invite someone to come to church with you. Yet some faithful church members attend for years and never ever think of inviting someone else to come. The church growth I have experienced has been done with very little advertising. Rather, it has occurred because our worship services and church life has touched people and helped people, and they in turn spontaneously would invite friends, relatives, and neighbors to join them in worship..

In more outwardly focused churches worship experiences will be created with the guest, the seeker in mind. In years past I would occasionally ask the congregation to fill out a worship survey. The purpose was to find out what people attending worship like or don’t like. Some years ago I stopped doing that. And the reason is that the more important question is: How can we design worship to attract those *outside the church* God wants to reach?

We are looking at some of the characteristics of churches that are driven by a sense of mission to the world. Also in these churches, ***believers will see their sphere e of life as their “mission field”***. It’s important to realize that if you’re a follower of Jesus, wherever God has placed you in life, in your school, neighborhood, work, family – this is your mission field. Church consultant Reggie McNeal has suggested that instead of putting in the bulletin how many attended worship the previous week, that a church lists in the weekly program how many people are involved in serving Christ outside the church.

Then too, churching with a sense of mission to the outside world ***will be looking for ways to serve the practical needs of the community.*** In one congregations I served the first Thanksgiving I was there the Lord laid on my heart that instead of having our Thanksgiving Eve Service at the church, that we would have it at a nearby home for elderly people. That facility was small, and frankly, not that nice. The residents were mostly poorer people. I tried to explain to my congregation how we needed to take the church to where people are. The night of the service, Nancy and I were there, our pianist was there, and only 6 other people. I was embarrassed that so few of the people at the church bothered to come. We had a wonderful evening with those dear folk, but few of our people made the effort to attend.

In churches that have a heart like God's, members will be looking for ways to reach out and bless their community.

So, is it members, or mission, that is our primary focus? Remember Jesus' last words before He left His disciples to go back to heaven? He told them to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Jesus never commanded a church to ***grow*** – but He did command the church to ***go!*** I can't guarantee that this church will grow in numbers. I don't have the power to make that happen. Only God gives growth, through the work of the Holy Spirit. But Jesus commanded us to ***go*** and make disciples. And most of the time, when a church is making disciples and reaching out beyond itself, growth will follow.

In these four messages in this sermon series I have shared some of my own story of how God has changed my understanding of what the church should be about. I hope and pray that you will join me and commit to this vision of the church.

Let me close with a story that sums up what I have tried to say today. Perhaps you have heard it before. It's called "The Life Saving Station".

"On a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves, went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Some of those who were saved and various others in the surrounding area wanted to become associated with the station and gave of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little life-saving station grew.

"Some of the members of the life-saving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. They replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully because they used it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The life-saving motif still prevailed in the club's decorations, and there was a liturgical life-boat in the room where the club's initiations were held. About this time a large ship

wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boat loads of cold, wet and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.

“At the next meeting, there was a split among the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club’s life-saving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon life-saving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a life-saving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own life-saving station. So they did.

“As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another life-saving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that sea coast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.”

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