

What good is the church?

Joseph Mangina

WHAT GOOD IS THE CHURCH? This question is not easily answered, especially if we think in terms of concrete, quantifiable goals or outcomes. A certain kind of traditionalist might, for instance, argue that the church serves as a source of social cohesion, binding together people of diverse backgrounds and interests into a body politic. A parent might see the necessity of the church in its usefulness in the moral education of children, while a stressed-out young professional might say that it provides a relief from the daily grind, the one area in life where she is not called upon to “perform.”

There is perhaps a grain of truth in all these answers; yet we would be hard pressed to say that any of them justifies the existence of the Christian church. The church as source of social cohesion? Many people in our culture find religion to be a dividing rather than a uniting force. The church as moral pedagogue? But society has no lack of moral resources, and anyway the church’s authority in this area has been severely eroded in light of clergy sexual abuse and other scandals. The church as relief from stress? For some people maybe, but not for all. Others will turn to therapy or sports or social media, activities that have the advantage of letting you sleep in on Sunday mornings.

In truth, the answer to the question, “What good is the church?” lies elsewhere—in a name and in a story. The name is Jesus of Nazareth, a young Jew who lived in the far-off days of the Roman empire. The story is the things he did—his announcement of God’s coming reign, his miracles and acts of healing, his gathering a community of followers—as well as the things that happened to him, especially his death at the hands of the Romans and his rising to life on the third day. This name and this story stand at the heart of the Christian message, and furnish the *sole justification for the church’s existence*. Christians are those

who see in Jesus Christ God’s powerful act of deliverance. In Christ, God has loved the world in such a way to enter it in person, in the weakness and frailty of human flesh, enduring the shame of a judicial execution to triumph over the unsuspecting powers of this age. It may seem an unlikely story, if also a strangely beautiful one; but in any case it is the story Christians are charged with telling.

Unfortunately, the church does not always tell the story well. Picture the following two scenarios. Instead of talking about Jesus, the church can talk mainly about itself, its powers and prerogatives and pretended superiority over others. The church can become arrogant and self-satisfied. Whenever this happens, the world rightly turns a deaf ear to its message. The church can, however, also commit the opposite error: of being far too timid; of treating Jesus as the private possession of Christians, rather than as the light and hope of every human life, no matter how stunted or hurting or marginalized. Both these errors arise when the church becomes so preoccupied with itself that it forgets the forgiveness and sustaining power of God.

Yet even when the church forgets God, God does not forget the church. Jesus promised his followers that they would be led by the Holy Spirit, who bestows gifts on the church to remind it of its true calling as God’s people. This reminding by the Spirit takes many forms. The Spirit gives the church the Scriptures, the definite telling of the story of God’s love poured out on the people Israel and on the world. The Spirit gives the church the saints, not perfect human beings, but simply people whose lives powerfully display the pattern of Jesus’ life, death, and self-giving. The Spirit gives the church baptism as a means of welcoming new members into God’s family, and the eucharist (“thanksgiving”) as the common meal where we encounter Christ in bread and wine. The Spirit gives the church

voices to sing—there is something about the gospel that demands to be sung—and ears by which Christians attend to their brothers' and sisters' needs. The Spirit gives the church the poor, as a reminder that the church (like Jesus) is naturally more at home among society's bedraggled and battered souls than in the corridors of power. If only this were more often true! The Spirit gives the church hope, causing her to yearn for the day when God will "wipe away every tear from their eyes" and the broken creation itself will be made whole.

The American preacher and civil rights leader Will Campbell said once that Christianity is not a matter of improving the improvable—that is, taking the already good folk and making them even better—but of raising the dead, instilling hope in the hopeless. One hears in Campbell's words an echo of the apostle Paul's language of Christ's dying for the ungodly. We have an important clue here to the character of the church. The church, we might say, consists of people who have begun to suspect that they do *not* "have it all together." Outwardly the church consists of its traditions, its structures, its leadership, and indeed no enduring human institution could get along without

things of this kind. Inwardly, though, the church is the company of those who have found their hope in Jesus, and who are willing to join others in following this strange Saviour. One contemporary author has put it well, writing that Christianity is "not a religion but an adventure." For "Christianity" here we might simply say "the church."

What, then, is the church good for? Perhaps the most compelling answer is that what the church is good for is ... Jesus Christ. He, and not the church, is the very kindness and mercy of God poured out for the world. But if we would be his followers, we discover that we cannot do without the church. It is he, Christ, who would have us live not as isolated individuals but as his people, praying, singing, making eucharist, telling the story again and again until it finally sinks in that it is *our* story, and that whatever our imperfections they are no barrier to God's will to be with us humans in Jesus. The church has the great, glad privilege of bearing testimony to this God; that is what the church is good for.

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Questions for discussion

1. What do you think of when you hear the word "church"?
2. What benefits have you experienced from the church?
3. What turns you off about the church?
4. Can you believe in Jesus without being a part of the church?