

Where does the church belong?

By [Scott Gunn](#)

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A few days ago, I took part in a silly Facebook discussion about, among other things, the proper position of the altar in churches. That's not so interesting, though it was great fun. What struck me was a side comment made by someone about how all of this didn't matter too much, since the church was meant to be outside, serving the needs of the world.

I've heard plenty of people say this, and I never could quite figure out my discomfort. On the one hand, the last thing I'd want to do is defend any position suggesting that the church should cower inside buildings and shun the needs of the world. On the other hand, I don't quite think it's right to suggest that the *church* should be serving the needs of the world. Before you hit the outrage button, hear me out. Then feel free to tell me I'm nuts in the comments.

It seems to me that the church's task is to gather its people around the altar so that we might offer our sacrifice of praise. It is then the task of the church to send people out into the world to serve the needs of the world in Christ's name. There's a reason the dismissal is so important. In the final words of the mass (which comes from the same Latin word as mission!), the deacon exhorts people to "love and serve the Lord" and so forth.

Sometimes, I think we confuse the work of the church and the work of disciples. The church—the *ekklesia*, the community—is found where Christians are gathered. The work of the church is to offer prayer and praise; to proclaim the gospel; and to promote justice, peace, and love. (Those are phrases lifted from the Book of Common Prayer catechism.) The mission is carried out by the members of the church—by everyone.

So, in some sense, the work of the members is the work of the church. In other words, getting disciples to share the good news and to serve the world is the work of the church. But in another sense, it's worth thinking about a nuanced difference between the church's work and the work of its members. Here's an example: it is

possible to imagine a worshipping congregation that had no outreach ministries, as long as all its members were formed and equipped to be out in the world doing this work. It seems to me that it is impossible to imagine a group of people who do only outreach as a church if they do not worship.

When it comes to members of the church, we must be clear that our identity as Christians demands that we worship regularly, that we pray daily, that we give generously of what we have, that we attend and respond to the real needs of the whole world, and that we share the good news of God in Christ. None of it is optional for someone who claims to follow Jesus Christ, really.

This becomes important because sometimes you hear people saying something along the lines of that the church shouldn't be focused on worship when there are so many needs in the world. And I fully agree that any church which turns its back on the needs of the world is no church. Worship is the thing. Thinking about sermons, symbols (vestments, candles, and so forth), proclamation of the word, music, and so on is very much the concern of the church. There is not a zero-sum world here: a focus on worship does not reduce our focus on the world. Rather, a focus on worship *is* the church's work, and that worship is itself the thing that nourishes, equips, and sends us all out into the world.

John Chrysostom spoke potently about the relationship of worship and needs of the world. He wrote, "Give Jesus Christ the honor which he himself has asked for, by giving your money to the poor. Once again what God wants is not so much golden chalices but golden souls." And certainly that is true. But it is also true that the sacrifice of praise, if fervently offered, teaches us to open our eyes to see Jesus Christ in our midst. To discern the body of Christ in bread should open us to see Christ in others.

Bishop Frank Weston of Zanzibar said, in one of the [finest Anglican orations ever](#),

If you are Christians then your Jesus is one and the same: Jesus on the Throne of his glory, Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, Jesus received into your hearts in communion, Jesus with you mystically as you pray, and Jesus enthroned in the hearts and bodies of his brothers and sisters up and down this country. And it is folly—it is madness—to suppose that you can worship Jesus in the Sacraments and Jesus on the Throne of glory, when you are sweating him in the souls and bodies of his children. It cannot be

done.

And that's it. Worship rightly done sends us out into the world. This means that the church in offering its worship is *always* sending its people out into the world.

There are plenty of wonderful organizations who serve the needs of the world, but if they are not oriented around worship, they are not churches. Some of these organizations do a much more effective job of serving needs than many church organizations, and I very much hope that Christians will support and join them. But, again, they are not churches.

When the church is doing its work, it will be forming disciples of Jesus Christ who find the needs of the world irresistible and who find themselves called to respond. Worship is not a distraction from the world, but rather it is the thin place that opens our eyes to the glory of God and thus to the possibility of glory in our world. Seeing Jesus Christ in the sacrament nourishes and equips us to see him in the poor and the marginalized. Worshiping the King of kings draws us to proclaim the kingdom of God in our time.

In heaven, the church will spend eternity gathered in worship. On Earth, the church is meant to gather at the altar for only for a time. We delight in glory, but do not linger. We do not linger, because we are meant to go forth to do the work we have been given to do.

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