

Rooted in Mission Not Maintenance

ROB PERRY

It is called “The Church”, which is what it once was. It still *looks* like a church, a brown brick building, with a church steeple, even a cross on top, but people don’t worship there. Around a decade ago the small congregation moved out, and the building was sold. Now it’s a trendy downtown club, home to a variety of local jazz and classical performers. Its name is a sad testament to what once was.

Two blocks away, at the top of another brick building with a steeple, is a large sign. Spanning the width of the church, written in chipped blue paint, it reads “Salvation Army Citadel.” This church moved in around 1904, and moved out in the 1980s. It’s an apartment building. The sign remains as a faded reminder of the past.

Less than a block up the road are two impressive works of architecture that stand almost side-by-side. These church buildings exist as a remembrance of what were, a century earlier, two of the most influential denominations in the east part of downtown. In fact, people still do worship at both. In the past number of decades as other Christian denominations were on their way out, these massive church buildings acted as anchors. Even though they have little or nothing to do with their environment, they remain; large buildings, tiny congregations, locked doors. Monuments.

The saddest part of the situation is that, as when they

were first constructed, these buildings stand in some of the neediest areas of their city. Gangs, crack prostitutes, poor families, and homeless addicts pass by their doors every day, and sleep in their stairwells every night. Social problems still remain. In fact, they have increased, but God’s people have left.

The prophet Ezekiel says, “I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none. So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD.” (22:30-31). In a very real sense, it is the Church’s responsibility to “stand in the gap” on behalf of our communities. But, unfortunately for neighbourhoods across North America, the on-site intercessors are gone. One morning, the community woke up, and its prophets, evangelists, and priests had disappeared. In a *twinkling of an eye*, the neighbourhood was abandoned. There was no one to stand in the gap anymore, because the intercessors had moved to the suburbs.

You can almost read the congregations’ stories in the bricks on the church walls. Around 80 or 100 years ago, new churches formed mostly around immigrant populations that inhabited the community. The churches

were the most important landmarks in the neighbourhood. Everyone was affiliated with one or the other, whether they attended on Sundays or not. The children attended the Sunday Schools. When they became teenagers, many stopped going, only to find themselves back in times of crisis or when they were a little older, sending their own children to Sunday School. In communities filled with poverty and crisis, the churches were the safe places, the houses of refuge, the sanctuaries.

In many cases, small congregations inhabited these buildings, meeting faithfully week after week, year after year. But generations passed, children grew up and had children; they got better jobs, and moved into “nicer” areas of town. *Their* children in turn grew, got degrees and careers, and with them, families, larger incomes, bigger houses, and fancier cars. With every succeeding generation, love for the community diminished. Churches lost their mission focus, and as their children became adults, the thought of remaining in the neighbourhood as a witness of hope, was not a consideration. The church was no longer *their* sanctuary. Those who still attended commuted. Gradually, the churches stopped owning responsibility for their communities, and began focusing on insular details such as sermons, traditions, rivalries and maintaining programs that had been running since the church’s inception. At some point, the desire to maintain defeated the impulse for mission. Inevitably, eventually the church itself “graduated” to the suburbs, where its members lived. All that was left in the urban centre was a monument; a reminder of what was once the gathering place for a community.

That is the past; the question for the *present* is how the Church can regain its lost sense of mission? After decades, and even centuries of maintenance focus at the expense of our communities, how do we turn our hearts and minds towards mission again?

One of the most succinct descriptions of mission in the Bible is found in Jeremiah 1:17: “But the LORD said... “You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you...” It is a very simple, yet profound command, with massive implications: Wherever God sends us, we go; whatever he tells us to say or do, we do. Mission encapsulates not only the far corners of the earth, but also our own cities and communities.

Upon receiving God’s call, Jeremiah’s natural inclination was to look inwards: He said, “Ah Sovereign LORD, I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.” Astounded by the awesome task set before him, Jeremiah

was forced to face his own inadequacies. Today, in order for the Church of Christ to regain a vision for mission, we need to examine ourselves as Jeremiah did.

There are many motivations for mission, with love being the highest. What is mission after all, if not love for God expressed through service to the poor (see Matthew 25:31-46)? Let us examine a few things that keep us as people and congregations from attaining a missional existence. From there we will look at how to overcome these barriers, to move beyond maintenance, and achieve authentic mission.

Soren Kierkegaard specified three stages of human existence; reflecting a person’s attitude and motivation towards themselves and the world around them. The three spheres include the *Aesthetic Sphere*, the *Ethical Sphere*, and the *Religious Sphere*: selfish motivation for pleasures, a strict adherence to rules and duty, and a higher calling towards God, respectively. Any group of Christians has believers who fit into one of these three stages (not everyone experiences each stage; neither is any stage exclusive of the others).

1) The Aesthetic stage - maintaining the trivial

I say that I know life has gotten so boring so quickly in so many ways – and that neither of us planned for this to happen. I never thought that we would end up in the suburbs with lawnmowers and swing sets. I never thought that I’d be a lifer at some useless company. But then wasn’t this the way of the world? The way of adulthood, of maturity, of bringing up children?

Douglas Coupland from Life After God

What are we living for? What is most important to us? What drives us? According to Kierkegaard, the *Aesthetic sphere* is the pursuit of pleasure. During this stage, self is the focus. Hedonism, materialism, and other pursuits to do with personal gratification characterize this sphere. I believe that there are many people in our churches who have not graduated from this stage of development. When a believer sits in church week only for “personal blessing,” or when service to God is focused more on what “I get out of it” than on personal submission to the will of God, or when self-gratification is the benchmark of a religious experience, it is a safe bet that the believer is still living in the Aesthetic sphere.

When we choose to avoid mission, our focus shifts elsewhere. And, when the most important thing in life

is taken away, only trivialities remain. In the movie *The Untouchables*, the main character, Eliot Ness, faces the disparity between the urgent and the trivial. Eliot Ness is the leader of a group of incorruptible crime-fighters during the time of American prohibition. These “untouchables” had one goal, to bring Al Capone to justice. Towards the end of the movie we see Ness come face to face with life’s priorities. One of Ness’ men has just been murdered. The remaining three ‘untouchables’ in hiding, hopelessly trying to figure out a new plan of action. Their case against Capone is in shambles, their comrade is dead, and they are physically and emotionally drained. Just then Ness’s wife phones. There is silence in the room until his short conversation is over. After getting off the telephone, Ness turns to one of his partners and says, “She’s sitting in some room surrounded by people she doesn’t know going over kitchen colour charts or something.” And then he says with bewilderment. “Some part of the world still cares what colour the kitchen is.” To Ness, the colour of his kitchen walls was irrelevant.

Is it wrong to paint the kitchen? Of course not. However, when your life is mission focused, you gain a different perspective. Viewed in the light of a world filled with loneliness, disease and violence, does the colour of our kitchens really matter? What about the colour of the kitchen cupboards at church, or the carpet in the sanctuary, or the type of clothes the choir wears? Certainly these things need to be taken care of, but how many hours have we spent in committee meetings looking at colour charts while the battle rages outside our doors?

The cure for personal aestheticism

The Jewish mystic Abraham Heschel once said, “We should not spend our life hunting for trivial satisfaction while God is waiting.” God *is* waiting. But where is he waiting? He waits for us to turn to him in prayer. He waits for us to seek him and fulfill the most important command, to “Love God with all our hearts, with all our souls, and all our minds. This *is* the first and greatest commandment.” However, we must not forget the second commandment, for “the second is like (the first); love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39). And so, who are our neighbours? Christoph Blumhardt writes:

Do we want to follow Jesus on this way? Then we must accept him in this company. Then the call comes to us to set to work wholeheartedly, for here is Jesus.

He himself, speaking about the time of his absence, does not say, “I was rich and you respected me.” He says, “I was poor, I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was imprisoned, and you came to me, to the poor Savior. You came to me, who sat as a guest at the table of the lowest men. There you came to me.” Here must be your whole heart; here you must do the deeds of faith; for it is from here that the power comes which will overthrow the world, the wretched, unhappy world.

Mother Teresa said, “I believe in person-to-person contact. Every person is Christ for me and since there is only one Jesus, the person I am meeting is the only person in the world at that moment.” When we enter into relationship with the outcast and unwanted in our society, this is reality. We are in the presence of the divine. We must not lessen this by demystifying it. It *is* mysterious, and strangely humbling. To love Jesus by serving others is the essence of mission. And, when we replace mission with trivialities, it is we who miss out.

Battling corporate aestheticism

Joy and perfect communion with God can only be found in mission. When we are serving sacrificially and completely, we become partners with Christ in his redemptive work. When we exist in the aesthetic sphere of Christian life, it is easy to fool ourselves into thinking that we are fulfilling our destinies as followers of Christ, when we are only living to indulge our comfort zones and fulfill our selfish desires.

How much time have we spent debating what kind of music is to be played during worship? There are passionate Christians who will fight to defend their style of music. However, if we desire to recapture mission, we must enter into the “worship debate” only by examining our position through the lens of mission. Through a missional lens, the worship question is pragmatic: what kind of music will most effectively speak to the hearts of my church’s surrounding community?

We had to address this question when beginning a new church in urban, multi-cultural Toronto. In the neighbourhood surrounding the church, you will hear as many as 100 languages spoken. The residents of our community come from nearly every culture and tradition in the world. So, what music is right for this church?

On Sunday, we may sing songs in French, Mandarin, Spanish, Zulu, and Russian. We use a “worship band” style including keyboards, guitars, bass, drums, and

vocals - because it is the nearest we have to what most neighbourhood people listen to on the radio. As a mission-focused church, the principle here: *Every congregational decision must be mission focused.*

This principal carries over to other areas of church. For instance, our church meets on Sunday at 4:30 pm. Why? Because people in our neighbourhood like to sleep in on Sundays. Decisions are based on the needs of the community, not the desires of the believer.

I am sure we know people in our congregation who may be mired in the Aesthetic stage. Unfortunately, sometimes these people are pastors, or hold places of authority. However, until such people are ready to move on in maturity, mission is too high a calling. Mission involves sacrifice and a focus on others. It means being not only comfortable, but joyful when people who look differently enter our churches. Mission necessitates a passion and love for God's fallen creation, and a willingness to do whatever it takes to be a transformative influence in the world. However, as long as we are content to live a self-absorbed hedonistic religion, our goal will be to ultimately maintain a church that makes us happy and comfortable.

2) The Ethical Stage - Maintaining Legalism

Those... who are tied to blind dogma, perfunctory ritual, and institutional self-preservation, those who see God as guardian of the status quo (no matter how oppressive it may be), have so institutionalized God in their thinking and feeling that they are unable to see Him at work outside their narrow - and usually self-serving - perceptions

Phil Needham from Community in Mission - A Salvationist Ecclesiology (36)

During the roughly four centuries between the Old and New Testaments, pagan cultures influencing Jewish life became a significant problem. In response to the corrupting pressure of Greek and Roman culture, new politico-religious factions began to appear within Judaism. Over time, the most influential of these sub-sects became the Pharisees. Initially, the Pharisees were pious Jews who chose to turn their backs on a world that was increasingly contrary to the laws of God, and to separate themselves from corrupting influences.

They started well. The Pharisees were a lay-holiness movement dedicated to protecting Judaism from outside

influences and creating righteous followers of God, commendable goals. However, their good intentions were not enough. By the time of Christ, the Pharisees had generated 613 different laws pertaining to the minutia of Jewish life. Maintaining strict rules of conduct had become the reason for their religion. The end result of the Pharisee's movement was a rigid adherence to the letter of the Mosaic Law; to the point where today to call someone a Pharisee is synonymous with charging him or her with legalism.

Kierkegaard's second "existential sphere" is the *Ethical Stage*. Our churches are jam-packed with people who subsist in the ethical sphere. The ethical stage is the moral stage, the dutiful life. The ethicists are convinced that obedience to duty, structure, and rules will bring happiness.

There *is* something to be said for the ethical stage. The search for greater meaning begins when an individual despairs at the limited nature of temporary pleasure. A person comes face to face with the reality of his own sinfulness, and need for God.

Leviticus 25:18 says, "Follow my decrees and be careful to obey my laws, and you will live safely in the land." It was this type of directive that consumed the Pharisees, and is the same kind of directive that consumes many churches. It has become many believers' goal to live in perfect obedience to the law. While this is a commendable and biblical aim, it is the motivation behind the goal that we must examine.

Why do some "follow (God's) decrees?" So they will "live *safely* in the land." It is an insular, self-protective desire that drives them, and it inhibits mission. The irony is that the context of this command is the *Year of Jubilee*, an excellent Old Testament concept that is ripe with implications of social justice and self-sacrifice. It was during the Year of Jubilee that people were commanded to lend freely to those in need,¹ to free their servants and slaves,² and cancel debts.³ God *did* promise that he would protect and look after his people. In essence God says, "Sacrifice. Give to the poor. Free your servants. And, once you have given more than you dreamt you could, do not worry, *then* I will take care of you."

Moving beyond the Ethical Sphere

1 Deuteronomy 15:12-18

2 Deuteronomy 15:7-8

3 Deuteronomy 15:1

Some with to live within the sound of church and chapel bell. I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell.

C.T. Studd

The author Elie Wiesel, a Jew who lived through WWII concentration camps, once reflected on one of the great evils in the world: He said, “The opposite of love is not hate – it’s indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness – it’s indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy – it’s indifference. And the opposite of life is not death – it’s indifference.” In Jesus’ day, the Pharisees had become absorbed by the rule of the law, which became a hindrance to them living God’s will. We must not become indifferent. If we are apathetic and indifferent, we are useless to God.

The old maxim is true; sometimes we can be so godly minded that we are of no earthly good. We become so focused on having sanctified souls and spotless congregations, that our churches are frightening to anyone who does not follow our strict codes of conduct. When a genuine “sinner” enters our sacred doors, everyone is uncomfortable. The church members are uncomfortable, because suddenly an outsider is among them who does not fit into their rigid norms. She may look different, smell badly, or have a poorly behaved children. The visitor also feels uncomfortable. The moment she enters the church she sees a congregation of people who look the same, dress the same, have reserved pews, and condescending stares. She knows this is not a place of refuge for her. John White wrote:

Meanwhile our churches, like secular associations, are concerned with fund-raising, beautiful buildings, large numbers, comforting sermons from highly qualified preachers, while they display indifference to the poor, the insane, and the lonely. Jesus Himself would find no place in our all-too-respectable churches, for He did not come to help the righteous but to bring sinners to repentance. Our churches are not equipped to do that sort of thing.

Jesus was the embodiment of what it means to live beyond the ethical sphere. Did he obey the law? Yes. He fulfilled it by living beyond legalism, traditionalism, and ritualism, choosing to dwell in the dirt, grime, and hilarity that is found in relationship with people who were lonely, despised, liars, fornicators, cheaters, alcoholics, failures

and losers. This is the believer’s mission, to carry on this great work of Christ! The mission will be accomplished only through relationship. The method is simple. *Love your neighbour*; get to know the people near your home or church, be their friend, pray for them, and love them.

Just before his ascension Jesus commanded his followers to, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” As in the Year of Jubilee, when God’s people step out in faith, his promise is that “surely [God is] with you always, to the very end of the age.” Jesus’ command to his disciples is to “go”. It is not a command to necessarily pack up everything and go to a far off land, as it is a reminder that wherever you are, it is your duty as a disciple to make other disciples. It is for us to *live* the Christian life, not just to visit it. We are to proclaim Jesus and make disciples in his name. Wherever our homes and churches are, that is where we fulfill mission.

A poster in my office has a quote from an anonymous missionary, “I have but one candle to burn, and would rather burn it out where people are dying in darkness than in a land which is flooded with lights.” Jesus preached the kingdom of God, a place where the King reigns. It is the place where tears are replaced with laughing, darkness with light, sickness with healing, loneliness with community, and death with life. Where Jesus is, his Kingdom is. Where his people are, there also is his kingdom. If we believe the Holy Spirit is alive in us, and that with his power we *can* live out the ‘God with us’ vision of Jesus Christ today, we must ask, where would Jesus live now?

Conquering legalism in the Church

True disciples focus is beyond themselves and their own personal piety. They seek holiness with a burning passion, so that they may shine an even brighter light in the dark places where they bring the Kingdom. The key to overcoming legalism is to roll up our sleeves and get dirty. Relationships are dirty. To live incarnationally is messy and sometimes difficult. However, when we are in our glass palaces miles away from the realities of life, indifference is too easy an option, and adherence to legalistic ritual too readily replaces sacrificial mission.

In order to help congregations move beyond the ethical sphere, a few things must happen. We must

protect our churches from becoming ignorant of the outside world. Here, discipleship is key. The sad reality is that many people in our congregations are not passionate about mission because they have not been properly disciplined. I will never forget the day when one of the key elders at the church I grew up in stood in front of the entire congregation and made an off-hand comment that John 3:16 was the only verse in the Bible he had memorized. This is unacceptable. We must ensure that our congregation understands the Bible. This includes mission.

Prayer is essential. It ignites and maintains the believers' missional focus. At our church, we leave our building and pray in our neighbourhood at least once a week. This allows us to keep the reality of our community constantly before us. Being in the neighbourhood helps us to pray effectively about the specific needs of our community. Also, praying in the community is a prophetic statement. It tells our community that God's people are present and that someone is "standing in the gap" on their behalf.

We also do our best as a church to ensure that our mission focus is international, not just local. For example, we have united prayer for issues such as the persecuted church, child soldiers, or the AIDS epidemic in Africa. I remember hearing people from the streets of Toronto, many of whom have been affected by AIDS, praying for the victims of the African AIDS epidemic.

During appeal times in church we have opportunity to sign petitions regarding international social justice issues. We give opportunity for people in our congregation to write letters overseas. Despite the fact that our church is comprised largely of people from one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Canada, we focus for weeks on the annual offering for our denomination's overseas mission work.

It takes hard work and creativity to maintain a mission focus for a church body. However, if the vision is not clear, and the focus is not continually targeted towards mission, it will wind up in the minutia of legalistic irrelevance.

3) Religious phase - Towards Mission

Kierkegaard's third sphere is the *Religious Sphere*. This existential realm goes beyond the ethical. This stage is only discovered by faith. Kierkegaard examines the religious phase in his book "Fear and Trembling." In this study, Kierkegaard looks at Abraham's (near) sacrifice

of Isaac. He examines the motivation and the horror behind this humbling and confusing story. It is here that we enter the realm of faith. Kierkegaard said:

But what did Abraham do?... He mounted the ass, he rode slowly down the path. All along he had faith, he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him, while still he was willing to offer him if that was indeed what was demanded. He believed on the strength of the absurd, for there could be no question of human calculation, and it was indeed absurd that God who demanded this of him should in the next instant withdraw the demand. He climbed the mountain, even in that moment when the knife gleamed he believed – that God would not demand Isaac. Certainly he was surprised by the outcome, but by means of a double movement he had come back to his original position and therefore received Isaac more joyfully than the first time.⁴

Nothing but faith could have sustained Abraham through this trial. The trial itself seemed ludicrous and paradoxical. Abraham was required to suspend the ethical and proceed on belief in God only. He did not believe that God would violate the ethical, but he carried on in faith that God would rectify the paradoxical command with morality. Faith sustained him, and God delivered Isaac. Abraham lived in the *strength of the absurd*.

For our purposes in examining mission, I would say that the third sphere of our lives as Christians is when we surrender fully, and in faith allow ourselves to be led by God wherever and however he wills. We are no longer confined to our own wisdom. Instead we are called and commissioned to go wherever, and do whatever God commands.

God commanded Jeremiah: "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,"⁵ This encapsulates the essence of mission. Although we feel inadequate, we go wherever God commands, and do whatever he commands. Faith replaces fear, for God will protect and deliver us. If God calls us to a personal Jubilee, instructing us to give up our possessions, we need not be afraid, he will rescue us. If God calls us to leave our homes and

⁴ Kierkegaard, Soren. *Fear and Trembling*, (pg. 65). Penguin Books, Alastair Hannay, 1985, England

⁵ Jeremiah 1:7-8

move into the poorest area of our city, we need not be afraid, he will rescue us.

To go into the unknown involves an intense trust in God. It truly does require a “leap of faith”. The rich irony is in the fact that on the other side of the leap of faith, we find a fulfillment and joy that is indescribable to those who have not yet leapt. Frederick Buechner said that a person’s place “is where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” I, and countless others, can only testify that this is true.

Some years ago I led a team that took a group of community children from Toronto to a camp during the spring break. For seven days, 60 loud and hyperactive six 12-year-old residents of the urban jungle descended upon the wilderness campground. Due to some miscalculation and a lack of volunteers, the staff was drastically outnumbered, and the children smelled blood. I lost my voice on the first day, and by the third, we were all exhausted and beginning to be afraid of total collapse. Kids were fighting and threatening each other, some were continually trying to run away, while others would barricade themselves in the cabin to avoid going to programs. Between replacing broken property and cleaning lice out of hair and clothes, I found a new depth to my prayer life, as I pleaded God not to allow any kids (or staff) to get damaged by the end of the week.

In the midst of the turmoil, God’ Spirit descended upon camp. As day seven approached, we had a night in which we gave the kids an opportunity to accept Jesus as savior. Slowly one by one, kids came forward to the Mercy Seat - girls mostly. The boys were still feeling out the situation, sitting at the back, acting cool. That is until Jamal made his move. Now Jamal was never the most popular kid. He was a bit chubby and he was awkward in basketball. He always tried just that little bit too hard. He was too influenced by other kids, and would follow whoever happened to be around. But here he was, the first boy standing. Jamal stood up at the back and made the trembling journey to the front of the room where he knelt and prayed with a leader. Who should follow but his whole crew. The five or six other boys with whom Jamal had spent the week filed in line behind him and almost inexplicably found themselves kneeling at the front of the room as well. It was a beautiful moment.

But that’s not even the best part... Later that night in our cabin I recounted the day’s events with the boys. “I am really proud of you guys.” I said, “Today you made some very important decisions....” Just then another

leader came in, and I told the guys to share with her the good news from the day. All at once they started to share the story of decision day. Andrew, an especially enthusiastic young man, spoke up and said, “Yeah it was great! I got up first and went to the front, and then all the others followed...” It was at that point Jamal sat up stiffly in his bunk, and indignantly interjected, “F_____ off! I accepted Jesus first!”

As long as I live I will never forget those six words!

When I was in the southern part of Russia. I visited some refugee camps that tented hundreds of families who had fled from the Chechen war. In a couple short weeks I had become attached to a wonderful group of children who lived there.

I happened to be visiting during their annual festival, a competition in which children from different refugee camps presented songs, artwork and dance. In the days preceding the festival, I sat in on the kids’ rehearsals as they tried their best to put together what would be the best possible presentation for the day. For hour upon hour I sat and listened as they practiced. To this day, there are only the Russian phrases I have memorized: “Hello”, “How are you?”, and “It’s cool that you got on TV” - the repetitious line from the chorus of the pop song the kids sang in their presentation.

When the day finally came for the competition, I sat beaming with paternal pride (as if I had anything whatsoever to do with their presentation). The kids sang, danced, displayed their artwork, and generally had a great time. A group from another camp got up and put on a stunning display of their national dance. It was a close race, but when all was said and done, there was something far more important going on than song and dance. For those few days, in that refuge far away from demolished homes, bombs, and gunfire, hundreds of children displaced by war came together, and for a short time they were centre stage; the kids were the singers, the dancers, the artists, and the musicians. They were the stars and they shined!

In two weeks that seemed like two years, I got to know a small group of kids who had lived through horrors I cannot imagine. I got to see them at their very best. And, in case you are wondering, yes, they won! But truly, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that in those moments those children felt like the most important people on earth, not forgotten victims of an often-ignored war.

After my two weeks were finished, as I was preparing to get in a taxi and leave, Khavazh, one of the boys who

I had spent the most time with came to me, and through a translator asked me a question... another phrase I will never forget: he simply said, "When are you coming back?" Of course I had no answer for him. The kids in *my* community were waiting for me. But at that moment, how I wished I could stay. And in that moment, as it has so many times before and since, the Scripture resonated in my heart, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few."⁶ If only my fellow Christians knew the riches they were missing. If only the Church could understand the depth of joy and meaning found on the other side of mission. John Ortberg wrote:⁷

Jesus took a little child in his arms and said, in effect, 'Here's your ministry. Give yourselves to those who can bring you no status or clout. Just help people. You need this little child. You need to help this little child, not just for her sake, but more for your sake. For if you don't, your whole life will be thrown away on an idiotic contest to see who is the greatest. But if you serve her – often and well and cheerfully and out of the limelight – then the day may come when you do it without thinking, 'What a wonderful thing I've done.' Then you will begin to serve naturally, effortlessly, for the joy of it. Then you will begin to understand how life in the kingdom works.

It is through mission that we express perfect love for Jesus Christ. This outpouring of love is costly. It involves a terrifying leap of faith to go wherever God sends you. But the good news is that after that initial leap, the adventure is only beginning. To maintain a mission focus is not easy, but to do so is to be significant. Mission is the key to the meaningful life we have all been called to.

Conclusions

Kierkegaard's three spheres are mere guidelines. No one person or congregation fits perfectly into any sphere; I am sure that we can identify personal areas of selfish motivation as in the aesthetic sphere, rigid adherence to the rule of the law, as in the ethical sphere, and moments of unselfish obedience and faith, as in the religious sphere. However, if we are Christians, we are called to mission. There is no escaping this reality.

Todd Gitlin, an old time 1960's protestor, posits three complementary motivations for anyone who wants

6 Matthew 9:37b

7 From The Life You've Always Wanted

to wade into political activism.⁸ Adventure, duty, and love. I believe he has hit on something that goes beyond politics, and takes us into the realm of mission. The fact is that God understands people, and when we make ourselves available to him, he meets us where we are.

If our main motivation is fun and adventure, we could become downhearted, wallow in our selfish nature, and do nothing. Or, like Samson, God could use our flamboyant nature, and our desire for fun and new experiences as our motivation to go places no one else would ever dream of going. Shock rocker Marilyn Manson once bemoaned the fact that there were no new adventures out there. He said, "What other violence can you show? What other drug can you do? What other thing can you get pierced? It's all been done."⁹ There are no new adventures out there. We keep attempting to create the fastest roller coasters, the highest bungee jumps, and the wildest parties. The one true adventure that is left is simply to fearfully and courageously follow wherever God leads - to the darkest places on earth, or to people in our own apartment building. God, as redeemer, seeks to redeem our natures, not destroy them.

What about duty? I believe there are two ways to look at the word duty. We can look at it as a strict adherence to a set of rules, which is very limiting. Our other option is to confront our responsibility to the world. Mother Teresa once said that, "If there are poor in the world, it is because you and I don't give enough." This is a stinging indictment from a woman who lived her life among the poorest of the poor. However, we must take our duty to love and care for others seriously. This is not legalism, but *responsibility*. We are comfortable and well fed while elsewhere people are dying of starvation. Yes, we have a duty. We have a *God given* duty to care for others.

Adventure, duty, and love, but the greatest of these is love.

Love is God's defining characteristic and our highest aim. At the end of the day, we may live among the poor, give up our possessions, preach the Word, and feed the hungry, but if we don't have love, we are nothing. Eternally, our lives count for nothing. Maintenance takes root when love becomes distorted, and love for self replaces love for God. Mission is the pure expression of

8 in his book Letters to a Young Activist

9 taken from When No One Sees: The Importance of Character in an Age of Image (23), by Os Guinness

Importance of Character in an Age of Image (23), by Os Guinness

our love for Jesus Christ and for others..

Someone wrote: "Pity sighs, and says, 'how awful.' Compassion weeps, and says, 'I'll help.'" The world needs people who will help. Much more than that, the world needs the Church to roll up its sleeves, re-enter abandoned communities, and help. Because, like Jesus, we weep when we gaze upon fallen Jerusalem. We weep when we see empty monuments where life-giving inner-

city churches once were. We weep because all around the world mothers are weeping for lost children. We weep because every day people die without a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. We must weep. And from that place of brokenness, with our hearts firmly set on God, it is time for us to take that courageous leap of faith, and to respond to God's call to go wherever he tells us to go, and do whatever he tells us to do.