

What is the Church Really Here For?

In [a series of articles](#) titled “The Elusive Presence,” *Christianity Today* editor in chief Mark Galli describes the heart of the crisis within evangelicalism today. Mark is a longtime participant in evangelical churches and a keen observer of evangelical trends. He serves at the flagship periodical for the neo-evangelical movement. I’ve read with great interest his series—sometimes nodding along in agreement, other times raising an eyebrow (or two), and once or twice pulling out my hair.

In this column and in a few subsequent columns, I plan to interact with Mark’s series, explaining where I think he is spot on and where he might be way off. Let’s start with the overall gist of his argument.

We Have Forgotten God

We could sum up Mark’s overall concern about the state of evangelicalism this way: *American Christians have lost interest in God due to the incessant drive to do good things for God. We’ve lost a sense of dependence on the Spirit as we’ve pursued our own vision of effectiveness and faithfulness. In the bustle of activity, we’ve lost our first love. Quoting Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s comment about Western culture in 1968, Mark says of today’s church, “We have forgotten God.”*

To desire God—this is the sum and substance of life. It’s not just one injunction of many but the greatest commandment. It’s not merely a duty to fulfill but the fulfillment of life itself—to love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength. There is no greater blessing than to give oneself to this pursuit, and to enjoy the everlasting longing it produces in us.

Mark worries that our emphasis has so shifted to love of neighbor that we’ve neglected or merely assumed the first and greatest commandment. As a result, we’ve lost the fire that fuels our good works in the world to the point that we now run on fumes as we dedicate ourselves to unsustainable levels of activity.

To be clear, Mark’s point is not to advocate for less activity or anything less than an abundance of good deeds. His goal is to show where our activity-prone hearts may have led us astray, away from the love for God that leads to long-lasting good works on behalf of our neighbor. We’ve “made an idol of activity for God,” and in pursuing the second commandment, we’ve forgotten the first.

Longing for Renewal

A second thread running through Mark's series is the need to recover a vibrant sense of longing for God—a desperation-tinged desire for God and dependence upon his power. We need to be renewed. We do not desire him as we ought. We find it easier and more convenient to wear ourselves out in doing good *for* him than to seek a genuine, life-changing encounter *with* him. In this way, our good works can become a barrier to experiencing God, lulling us into complacency as to the state of our hearts, and replacing a life oriented toward knowing and loving God with a life full of religious activity.

In nearly every generation, the church must battle this kind of apathy. We are always in danger of losing our first love. At its best, evangelicalism is a renewal movement, calling Christians back to the passion that has marked all the religious awakenings that have risen over the centuries in various places around the world. As one of the leaders within the evangelical movement, it is appropriate for Mark to set before us a vision of renewal and revival marked by intense longing to know and love the God who made us.

Missional Critique

Mark's diagnosis of the modern malaise of evangelicalism is spot on. But then his series takes a strange turn, casting the blame for our disease on missional theology—the idea that the church exists for the sake of mission.

According to Mark, the missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin, though credited with inspiring and energizing many evangelicals in the past 50 years, was wrong to conceive of the church's purpose in missionary terms. The missional movement that Newbigin's insights inspired is faulty at the foundation because, when all is said and done, it gives rise same problem as the social gospel movement from a century ago: a reductionist understanding of the church's purpose that, in the words of Walter Rauschenbusch, makes the church “exist for the sake of the world.”

The church is not an instrument, Mark says, and “thinking of the church primarily in missional terms is a mistake” because it is “unbiblical” and “unhealthy.” So, whether you take the route of the mainline denominations and fall prey to the social gospel, or whether you take the route of Newbigin-inspired evangelicals and see yourself as “missional,” you're going to wind up plagued by burnout and malaise due to a foundational error—seeing the church as existing for the good of the world.

In the next column, I want to dig a little deeper into Mark's analysis of the missional conception of the church and set in wider context his proposal for how we should understand the church's purpose. In case you want a taste of Newbigin's work in the meantime, see [a summary of his thought](#) I put together earlier this year.

This is the first column in a series. See the follow-up posts below.

- [Mark Galli Takes On the Missional Movement](#)
- [The Church Isn't Missional?](#)
- [How the Church Became "Missional"](#)
- [Is the Church an Instrument?](#)
- [The Mission of the Church: Centripetal to Centrifugal, and Why It Matters](#)
- [The Beauty and Power of a Missional Church](#)

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