The Role of the Church in Salvation
By Tommy Givens

I. Fundamental Question:

What is the main problem that Christianity claims to solve? We might answer, “Sin,” or “separation from God.” This answer is not wrong, but it’s framed according to an abstract theological construct usually designed to describe the individual human being’s predicament. Within this construct, the doctrine of justification is usually deemed the answer to man’s predicament and often equated with the Gospel. But, we should be quick to notice that nothing about justification was structurally new with the coming of Jesus (as Paul makes so clear in Galatians and Romans) – Abraham, for example, was justified by faith. Because Jesus is obviously central to salvation and the Gospel, we should ask what was new about Jesus. The same criticism would apply to the oft-used language about the offer of an individual relationship with God. It is hard to believe that people like Abraham and David did not have a relationship with God, and yet they did not have the benefits of redemption through Jesus (which is not to deny any retroactive effects of the atonement). If one assumes the above theological construct, he often finds himself arguing that what’s new about salvation in Jesus is that the Christian’s relationship with God is simply better than that of Abraham or David. That too seems difficult to substantiate biblically.

To the question, what is the main problem that Christianity claims to solve? I think it’s better to answer something like, “A creation corrupted by powers rival to God, including a hostile human race unable to glorify its Creator.” Below, I want to contrast the sort of plan of salvation summed up in this answer (Salvation Plan B below) with the plan of salvation summed up in what we might call our traditional answer (Salvation Plan A below), i.e. "sin" or "separation from God"

Due to the categories we bring to a discussion like this, it will be easy to interpret the following as a critique of individualism and a promotion of “community.” “Individual” and “community” have long been considered simply two competing emphases in Christian discipleship. We usually feel the former has been overemphasized in our tradition/culture and the latter needs more emphasis. I want to avoid using “community” to militate against “the individual.” The individual is as important to the community as the eye is to the human body. Moreover, there is an important, individualizing trend in the New Covenant (e.g. in which every member of God’s people will know YHWH and have His law written on her heart). It is not that the individual needs less emphasis and the community more in our evangelical tradition. It is that the individual needs the context of Christian community which gives it meaning and purpose. The body is inconceivable apart from its individual members, but the individual members have no purpose apart from the body.

II. God’s Plan of Salvation

The two versions of God’s plan of salvation I want to contrast are two that I have lived with and taught as a Christian and as a missionary. One (A) was what I grew up with as part of several churches and came to Spain as a church planter with. The other (B) I began to discover and experience consciously about three years ago. Before describing each plan, I want to make clear that I don’t mean to say that the first one (A) is wrong
and the second one (B) is right. Rather, I want to say that the first one is inadequate, and the second one is better – better specifically in its ability to emerge gracefully from all of Scripture (especially the great narrative that holds the Scriptures together) and give more meaning and mission to the church. For our present purposes, I will not offer a complete biblical substantiation of Salvation Plan B. I can do that if anyone wishes to pursue the discussion down that route. For now, I'm content to make some cursory remarks about the biblical basis of Salvation Plan B and hope that the practical distinctions between Salvation Plans A & B will prove stimulating and compelling.

A. Salvation Plan A and Corresponding Ecclesiology

All individual human beings are enslaved to sin and separated from God. (This is deemed the primary problem Christianity can solve.) God sent Jesus to die for the sins of the world’s human beings. By paying the price of human sin, Jesus enabled all those who believe in him to receive forgiveness of their sins, begin to experience the fruit of knowing Jesus in their earthly lives, and ultimately go to heaven upon their death or Jesus’ return for them. In the way much of our evangelical tradition functions according to this plan of salvation, the church’s purpose is to enable individual Christians to grow in their relationship with Christ so that they will glorify God more fully in their lives and more effectively extend this salvation to lost individuals who have yet to submit their lives to Jesus. We plant churches because this is the only way for individual Christians to thrive as children of God and fulfill their callings to service in the world. Practically, it also seems like the best way to get salvation to more lost individuals. Thus, the church is the servant of individual Christians in their missions and individual non-Christians in their need of salvation (the church is equivalent to the sum of its parts). Notice that there’s been no need to mention Israel in this plan of salvation. The framework is not the history of God, his world, and his people (e.g. the grand narrative set up by Gen. 1-12), but an abstract theological assertion: because of sin, all human beings are separated from God. There is much truth to this plan, and practically all of its elements have a place in Salvation Plan B (though they're configured differently). But Salvation Plan A has great difficulty incorporating meaningfully much of the Scriptures and gives rise to a number of problems, especially for church-planting missionaries.

B. Salvation Plan B and Corresponding Ecclesiology

The second plan of salvation goes something like this: God created a world whose governing species forsook its commission as the overseers of a God-glorying creation. It gave way to the power of sin and produced a race enslaved to sin, together with the rest of creation united to it. This is the problem that Christianity claims to be able to solve (or at least narrate the solution). The goal of God’s salvation plan is a renewed creation filled with a human race that reflects his glory. Sin is a sort of powerful disease (something all humanity outside Christ is "under" per Rom. 3:9), which manifests itself in social phenomena and holds sway because of the rupture between God and the human race. For example, one brother kills another, and the environment becomes hostile to mankind (e.g. the creation resists man and forces him to work for his sustenance, death). Indeed, sin is an individual’s act, attitude, or condition, which separates the individual from God. But the forensic (i.e. legal) aspect of sin is only one
dimension of the phenomenon of sin, and the individual's condition before God is derivative of the larger phenomenon of sin as a power that enslaves and corrupts all creation and humanity. God called Abraham to father a people who would restore His glory to the creation. The nation of Israel is Abraham’s family according to the flesh. Its history shows that only the God of Abraham can save humanity and the rest of creation from its corruption but that that work depends on a body of people that genuinely obeys YHWH, dies to itself rather than seeks itself, and incarnates collectively God’s glory. Written words and laws are insufficient to form such a body, even if such words and laws are inscribed by God himself; sin and Satan are too strong for a fleshly body of people to overcome sin’s hold on it and the rest of the world. Rather such a body reveals that hold all the more (Rom. 5-7). Somehow God must intervene directly in His creation and introduce a power superior to sin’s into His world. And that’s what He does in the fullness of time – He comes to the world in Jesus, absorbs the full strength of sin, and overcomes it. Consequently, Jesus becomes the new authority over the world and inaugurates a new body to incarnate and expand His dominion (e.g. Eph. 1:18-23), led again by 12 heads like Israel of old, but formed according to the Spirit rather than the flesh (Mk. 3 and par.). This Spirit-inspired body manifests God’s defeat of sin and Satan (i.e. cross and resurrection) in its own bodily organism (e.g. Eph. 2). How? Primarily by its internal social dynamics (“It’s all about relationships as was frequently repeated during our time together in Lisbon.”). This people can genuinely love one another despite its internal differences, unlike Adam’s sons and fleshly Israel. This body is of course the church, and its purpose is to grow from Jesus through His Spirit to a body that penetrates and ultimately eclipses (not in size but power) all the nations of the world. Such a body shows the world that in fact the Gospel is true – because of the cross and resurrection, Jesus is Lord of the world. This body enacts sin’s defeat among the nations (e.g. Col. 1:18-24). It represents a new human race (Eph. 1:15-16), which unlike Adam’s (which includes Israel according to the flesh – e.g. Rom. 7), genuinely fills the earth with God’s glory. It proclaims and foreshadows the return of Christ to the earth, not to take bodiless souls to heaven, but to consummate the earth’s judgment and to resurrect His new human race from the dead so that it can bodily fill God’s new earth with His image and glory.

In this plan of salvation, the church’s primary purpose is not to be one of the ways individual Christians grow in their relationship with Christ so that they will fulfill their individual callings. The church’s primary purpose is to be the body of people that by the Spirit overcomes what ails all the other nations of the earth, and in fact, ails creation itself. The church must be more than the sum of its parts, and the Spirit is what unites the parts of the body to be more than their sum. I find a comparison with ancient Israel helpful here. What was to be a light to the nations was not "Israelites" but "Israel." That does not mean that "Israel" was less than "Israelites." But it does mean that "Israel" was more than "Israelites." Similarly, the church’s witness to the Gospel is not primarily in its individuals’ piety at work and Gospel-preaching, though these are obviously important. The Gospel can only be witnessed to by a plurality of persons, because the witness to the Gospel is something that happens between and among persons, not simply within them. One Christian can talk about the Gospel, but only two or more Christians can enact its truth and power, namely in the way they treat one another. Individual righteousness is inconceivable in the New Testament apart from its expression in relation to others within the body of Christ. We plant churches not because it’s the only way for individuals to grow in Christ but because only the church – as the church and as a body – can say and live with meaning that Jesus is Lord. Only the church is the realm where Jesus is taking over the powers hostile to God and His
world. Individual Christians cannot have any calling somehow independent from the church. Individual Christians do not have biblical meaning unless part of the church’s corporate witness to the Gospel that Jesus is Lord. The church is not the servant of individual Christians in their missions; individual Christians are servants of the church, members of Christ’s body in its corporate mission.

III. The Impact of God’s Plan of Salvation on Mission.

What I want to suggest here is that our conception of God’s plan of salvation shapes the way we conceive of and engage in mission. If we conceive of salvation as the deliverance of the individual from a state of separation from God and ultimate installment in heaven, mission will look one way. If we conceive of salvation as the deliverance of creation and its human race from the power of sin and the church as the growing humanity where this has palpably already begun to occur, mission will look quite another way.

A. The Impact of Salvation Plan A on Mission.

On Salvation Plan A above, mission is primarily about saving individuals from sin and hell and giving them the assurance of an eternity in heaven. The Gospel is often an explanation of the doctrine of justification by faith in terms of what Jesus did on the cross, as opposed to alternative paths to God (e.g. works, Buddha). (Notice that the resurrection does not actually play an integral role in salvation on this plan.) The Gospel, however, is not justification by faith alone in the NT. Nor is justification by faith, as so conceived, able to nourish the church as such (since it seems to imply that the church is not necessary to the individual’s justification). Consequently, the church becomes inadvertently secondary in Gospel mission, even if we speak of it as primary in our preaching/teaching. It is simply an important environment for individual discipleship, not the vehicle of the Gospel. Mission is something the church equips its members to do "away from church" (e.g. at work, kids' soccer games, with neighbors), not what the church does by means of its life together. The primary vehicle of the Gospel remains individual Christians in their various spheres of testimony. Perhaps we could add to this the mission that takes place at special evangelistic events designed to commend the biblical theory of salvation to unbelievers (i.e. how God can deliver listeners from individual separation from God/sin and give them the assurance of heaven).

Churches planted under Salvation Plan A in anything but extremely adverse circumstances tend to lack cohesion, as they lack a corporate reason for existence. Their discourse is reducible to how to understand and improve the individual’s relationship with God or service of Jesus Christ, and other dimensions of church life so central in the NT (e.g. fellowship/accountability, outreach to the needy, Gospel proclamation) are functions of individual discipleship, not of the church. “Church” ends up being a series of services/meetings designed to serve the individual Christian in her quest for holiness and faithfulness. The context of church body life is the few formal gatherings of the church each week, and church members who do not preach, teach Sunday School/youth group, lead music, or clean the church building often find they have little if any role to play in the church. Accordingly, they have minimal ownership of and commitment to the life of the church, and little sense of the church's
corporate mission. Such churches have great difficulty \textit{multiplying} (which is not to say they don't grow in number). In fact, they tend to foster church as something one is free "to shop for."

Church planting missionaries operating under Salvation Plan A often provide new churches with a DNA that does little to ensure local church unity or stimulate robust relationship with other local churches in the same city (I see this in the fruit of some of my own church planting ministry). Unity is typically pursued in the arena of individual discipleship, and its lack is alarming primarily because of the unfaithfulness of the members who are compromising it, not because of the antithesis of disunity and the church’s mission. In other words, church members can be justified and supposedly be growing in their relationship with Christ while the church is characterized by superficial interpersonal relationships or even enmity. The mission of extending salvation to lost individuals can seemingly continue despite church disunity. Yet, the world cannot know that Jesus was sent by God if Christians are not united (Jn. 17:23).


On Salvation Plan B, mission is primarily about forming a worldwide body of people that overcomes by means of the Spirit the powers that divide humanity outside Christ (according to e.g. blood/race, territory/nationality, mammon; see e.g. Col 3:8-17). The body of Christ does this by living/embodying the death and resurrection of Jesus, whereby the members spurn all claims to status and experience with one another Jesus' victory over sin and death (e.g. Php. 2:5-11), culminating in their own resurrection to inhabit the new creation. In short, they love one another with Christ's love. This church proclaims the Gospel that only Jesus is the true Lord of the world and invites others to serve Him as part of His people (e.g. why baptism signified conversion in the NT). It is not an invitation to merely "believe" something theoretical that has eternal consequences for human individuals and then attempt to "live" it practically the best one can with the help of the church. To serve Jesus as Lord is to abandon all loyalties which fragment humanity and creation (Acts 17:22-31) and become an integral part of His body with its place/role in God's plan to save the world. Jesus has subdued the powers which corrupt God's world; He is Lord over them (e.g. Mt. 28:18; Col 2:15). The body of Christ then is the Spirit-endowed realm where Jesus' reign is uniquely manifest. Serving Jesus in and through His body is how people experience the Kingdom of God and come to share in the Lord Jesus' mission to bring His reign to bear upon the nations still living under sin and Satan (e.g. Mt. 18:18:19; 28:19-20). Therefore, the church is not secondary in Gospel mission. It is the instrument and locus of salvation (i.e. salvation \textit{in} Jesus Christ). Therefore, the cause of Christ grows only as the church grows, not merely in number but in power, specifically the power to incarnate collectively a humanity stronger than sin. We can achieve beautiful church services attended by lots of people that are justified by faith (in the forensic sense) and blessed with a personal relationship with Christ and yet fail in Christian mission if the churches we plant and water do not grow in power over sin and Satan in their body life. While Salvation Plan A may be able to sustain limited impetus (in some believers) to preach
justification by faith alone out of obedience to Christ's command and compassion for those destined to hell, Salvation Plan B generates mission for the church. In fact, the church's mission is intrinsic to Salvation Plan B.

Churches planted under Salvation Plan B understand that their life together is the focus of their discipleship. They don't have to be reminded of the importance of unity (though they will have to be exhorted to unite), because unity across fleshly borders in the name of the Lord Jesus is the work of the Gospel, not simply one of many virtues disciples of Christ aspire to. Church is not meetings. It's family; it's security; and it's salvation (cf. 1 Cor. 5:5). Church is the community which gives Christian individuals their sense of meaning and purpose 24/7. The church's mission takes place in and through the life of the church, not once the church "breaks from the huddle" (which does not exclude individual evangelistic roles away from church gatherings but does dictate what they're bearing witness to). Church is the society in which Christ's reign takes visible form through love forged by sharing with one another: sharing time, sharing homes, sharing God's word, sharing bread, sharing sins, sharing prayer, sharing money. One cannot love as Christ loves without sharing with the beloved what is most sacred and precious. "By this the world will know that you are my disciples – if you love one another." A church following Salvation Plan B lives as if the progress of the Gospel depends upon its love-based unity as a local church, a city-wide church, and a world-wide church, because the Gospel does depend on the church's unity. Fundamental to the task of missionaries is the preaching of the Gospel in such a way that it generates the church and teaching the church body how to love one another as Christ loves (or, as our "Crowded House" friends might say, to create the culture of the church).

IV. The profile of the church in the world

I didn't know if there was time to discuss this point. I've discussed this topic with several of you already and written something (kinda long unfortunately) about it if you're interested. Suffice it to say that it seems to me the NT church was something more on the order of a commonwealth than a religious group. When we think of the church as less than that today, we are unconscious of the way other forms of human community (e.g. national, economic, professional, ethnic) inevitably compete with loyalties owed exclusively to Christ by Christians. Human communities which define their solidarity by territory, blood, or written legislation engender the deeds of the flesh (e.g. Gal. 5:19-21), which are opposed to the Spirit. Early Christians realized the futility of pursuing a peaceful, God-glorifying human community so defined, weak as the flesh is in the face of sin and Satan. Salvation is in Christ alone, among people united only according to the Spirit.
Points of Clarification

1. In case I've somehow communicated through the above that individuals are not important to God, only communities and nations…

That would be like saying that hands, feet, kidneys, and lungs are not important, only the whole body. The body is as inconceivable apart from its members as are the members apart from the body. The body needs its members, and the members need the body. The key is the context which gives individuals their meaning and purpose. My concern is that most of our ecclesiology and missiology are in practice like thinking that the body exists to serve the hands, feet, kidneys, and lungs in their respective missions. It would be better to see that only as the hands, feet, kidneys, and lungs fulfill their purpose within the body do they have meaning in the aims and enjoyment of human existence. The members are subservient to the body. Hands, feet, kidneys, and lungs do not communicate life to the world around in isolation from the body. It is the body as a harmonious whole, animated by the Spirit, that mediates the power of God's salvation to its own members and to the world.

2. In case I've somehow communicated through the above that a single righteous man is really of no value, that if one does not have a great community around him, it's all for naught…

I guess I'm trying to say something close to this. Of course, it's not as though God does not value righteous individuals. He obviously does. But we need to be clear about what we mean by "righteous." While we might be able to say that a righteous individual is of inherent value generally, I don't think we can say that if we understand righteousness in terms of soteriology and ecclesiology. The reason for this is that God's plan has never been to merely save individuals but rather to redeem His entire creation. Nor did He commission righteous individuals to bring His salvation to His world. He commissioned Christ and His body to inaugurate and extend (respectively) His kingdom to all the nations. (It dawns on me as I'm writing this that the one exception to this is Jesus. He, of course, is "the righteous one" par excellence whose faithfulness reconciled and is reconciling the world to God.) Perhaps that is part of the reason there is such a close identification of Christ and the church in the NT, e.g. 1 Cor. 12:12, esp. the last four words; cf. Col. 1:24; 2 Cor. 5:11-6:13). Christ does not have individual "bodies" working for Him in the world; He has only one body – the church. So it seems difficult to conceive of any righteousness that is not predicated of a person only as she is embedded in the body of Christ.

3. If you've interpreted from the above that God's plan for mankind might be thwarted because of the lousy way we live as kingdom communities… ...I think you've actually understood me quite well. We must feel the full weight of God's calling upon us. But before sounding the alarm, recall one extremely important difference between Israel according to the flesh and the new covenant people of God: the Spirit. God will not fail at what He Himself is doing. Mosaic Israel did not enjoy the pervasive life-giving work of the Spirit the way the church does, and God has promised us through His word and Jesus' resurrection that the Lord Jesus will prevail through the church.
4. In case you imagine that the church in Pamplona is a community accomplishing the above while few other Christian communities in the world are.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The various Christian groups meeting in Pamplona, including the mother church with whom we have worked so closely, continue to manifest a host of sinful problems. The only thing I can say is that Salvation Plan B and the role of the church in it have increasingly become the focus of the groups we're working with in Pamplona, and that has yielded some of the fruit we should expect given what we find in the NT.

An important corollary to the shortcomings of mission that is configured according to Salvation Plan B is the genuine Gospel fruit in churches/missionaries working under Salvation Plan A. You don't have to understand Salvation Plan B or its contrast with Salvation Plan A to be a part of it. That's because the Spirit is the protagonist of Christian mission, not theologians, and the Word of God works in spite of and beyond the medium of human reason. Even if the above makes one feel like all he has seen and heard in church regarding salvation and community is wrong (which it most likely is not), he can take heart in God's providential and gracious use of us even when we don't understand what He's doing. We should not, however, take God's providence and grace as an excuse for not growing in our understanding of His word and His plan. Even if we can serve Christ while misunderstanding His plan, I suspect that we can serve Him better if we understand our role as His people according to the Scriptures.