

So, just what is the most potentially helpful research your enterprise can look at? Well, the answer is this: the data that can be gathered and measured in the normal course of its regular activities!

I can just hear some of the happy responses right now! “Oh, we’re good, we are already doing that and have been for years”...or...“Oh, yeah, we get a summary of the company’s monthly financial statements from the bean counters every month and the boss always tells us to watch our expenses closer”...or...“Oh, sure, as deacons, we get info on the donations for our church in our Board reports.” But, wait, really, just how good is your organization? Are you acting on the best, most relevant data for assessing excellence?

Let’s back up. *By definition*—most people inhabit *average* organizations, whether workplaces or churches or whatever. We all routinely observe that only a few organizations are top organizations—because the word *average* is, well, definitional to the *average* organization. Let’s take a shrewd, artsy detour for a bit.

Did you ever listen to the decades-long radio program called *A Prairie Home Companion*? Host Garrison Keillor had storytelling segments in the show called “News from Lake Wobegon.” And many people remember the very last sentence that Keillor would end with: “That’s the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” Yeah, that’s right, *everyone* in Keillor’s fictional hometown of Lake Wobegon is above average, yes, better than others—but without any real, solid, objective evidence or data supporting that conclusion! The funny thing is, I’ve never met anybody who didn’t get the joke—yeah, everyone knows that many people they know very well often overestimate and overstate the true status of their own personal place or clan!

So, think about it, and answer this about the typical local church in America: how’s it *really* doing—is it truly great or is it really just average? For that matter, are *your* church’s actions yielding average impact or exceptional results? To answer that, let’s do some research to gain a path to some essential wisdom!

The core answer to these questions requires accessing two valid points of reference: where your church authentically is today *and* the standard of where your church could be, or, rather, where God wants it to be! And of course, the standards set for every church are found in the Bible. But there’s always a nagging problem with that. Everyone simply looks at the Bible differently than others. For example, some may think *the* standard is worship. Others may think it’s all about the preaching. Still others may think it’s about the gathering and fellowship of believers. And those are all very important things! However, those mostly largely speak to the seed, the internal dynamics. But ultimately, God is outward-looking in His vision and mission—yes, the Body of Christ’s outward-looking purposes! *Say what, you say?* Sure...let’s unpack that!

OK, let’s first take the two greatest commandments that Jesus spoke to. Here’s Matthew 22:34-39 (ESV). “But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Of course, Jesus’s directive about loving “your neighbor” is all-encompassing, not in the least limited to current believers! That’s “*outward-looking!*” And as the book of Acts unfolds with the history of the early church: we see the same effective pattern: *outward...outward...outward!* Here are key examples of the ultimate outward-looking loving of neighbors exemplified and codified in Acts.

- About 3,000 were added upon Peter’s action taken with the very first sermon. Thousands more were added as the early years unfolded. *That’s the ultimate outward-looking loving of neighbors!*
- God radically expanded the scope of manifesting His love with the adding of all Gentiles to the church’s mission of the Gospel. *That’s the ultimate outward-looking loving of neighbors!*
- Paul took robust, effective missionary journeys, strategically pioneering churches. In fact, the church at Antioch was key for sending out missionaries to Gentiles. In his second journey, Paul

received and quickly acted upon the Spirit's vision to go to Macedonia, opening up modern-day Europe. *Yeah, once again, that's the ultimate outward-looking loving of neighbors!*

These are amazing specifics of *concretely* loving neighbors with truly eternal impact. Perhaps you're thinking, well, yeah, but that's just the history of the early church getting started...that's not for today, that's not for *us*. But, wait, didn't God communicate His specific will for *the continuance* of His truly big vision? Of course, He did! Peter and Paul wrote two very clear passages—two aligned framings of God's vision for the church in serving all humanity, words that a skeptic has to work really hard to misinterpret!

Peter's audience was "to those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ"—and I trust that includes serious believers like us today! Peter wrote this in 2 Peter 3:9..."The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." *All!*

Also, well after his missionary journeys out of his church in Antioch, Paul wrote to Timothy: "...God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time." (1 Timothy 2:3b-6) Yes, God's vision is that He wishes that *none should perish and that all reach repentance*. Also, we read that *God our Savior desires all people to be saved*...that He gave Himself as a ransom for *all*.

Now, that's the far-reaching scope of God's *vision* for salvation—*all of humanity!* So, what is the *mission* of believers in Christ, then? You know the answer! Before the Cross, Jesus *co-missioned* His disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20) As if that wasn't enough, here are the last words of the resurrected Jesus recorded in Acts just before His ascension: "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8) That. Is. Us.

God's great mission *for us* is to go forth and make disciples of all nations! In fact, think of your own story: *your* faith in Christ is the product of an outward-looking Body of Christ ministering to outsiders hearing the Gospel of the Kingdom of God! Listen to this from Romans 10:13-15. "For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'" Hey, researching these verses begets the wisdom to take action!

Here's the deal, then *and* now. God's vision and mission are deliciously, relentlessly outward-looking and Gospel-centric for all believers and every local church. Yes, including our present day! That's the standard. I know we all love our churches—for the worship, the preaching, the fellowship. And rightly so, praise God! But that's merely foundational for the rest of each week, yes, foundational to the outward-looking ministry of Gospel-love to neighbors...to coworkers...to others in our day-to-day trek. You know, *outsiders!*

Hey, isn't the real story here that there are many churches who don't substantially accept and take action on God's vision and mission for the Body of Christ? 'Fraid so. So, what kind of standards are *they* pursuing? Perhaps cultural. Perhaps political. Perhaps just keeping it in the comfort zone of the already-here. Maybe a bit of self-centered glorifying of God...with no invitation to outsiders. But we see where that can easily end up—in a Lake Wobegon self-assessment that "my church" is above average, yes, even exceptional...

But God's passion and vision remain clear. A comparison to *His* standards must be made to truly determine if any given church is a model Antioch—yes, adding new believers and sending missionaries—or a Lake Wobegon, where everyone present is simply thought "above average." Hey, blessings on your church as it journeys toward fulfilling God's standards of vision and mission! May God declare your church excellent!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Can a long-established church be considered fully pursuing God's will if it is not pursuing robust missions (i.e., the effective proclaiming of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God)—from local salvation outreaches to the end of the earth? And shouldn't that church be expecting numerical results, like the early church in the Book of Acts? Discuss fully.
2. How is your church doing with God's vision and mission, now and as planned for the future? Be specific.
3. Do you agree that these definitions in the episode of both *vision* and *mission* accurately capture the specific intent and focus of God's New Covenant? *If so*, why do you think that relatively few churches even attempt to have robust outreaches and results with the salvific Gospel of the Kingdom of God? *If not*, provide the verses of the Bible that *better* capture God's *vision* and *mission* for His church to minister to every creature. Then explain how your church is doing *that*.