



**A CHURCH WITH A PURPOSE
(Sermon)**

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**Lowell Cooper, Retired
Former General Conference Vice President**

Suggested Hymns:

Opening: "O Love of God, How Strong and True!" SDAH #79
"God Who Spoke in the Beginning" SDAH #86
Closing: "Rise Up, O Church of God" SDAH #615
"Eternal God, Whose Power Upholds" SDAH #90

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 3:8-10 (NIV)

"Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms ..."

Introduction

In the few sentences of the scripture reading for today, the apostle Paul summarizes the purpose of his life and provides a crucial insight regarding the purpose of the Church. What is the purpose of the church?

Illustration:

Several church buildings are situated along a major street in a city in the USA. One of these buildings in particular commands attention. It is not a large church, but rather attractive in architecture. It was built with large sandstone blocks, has stained glass windows, and a tall, arched double door at the entrance.

One would expect to find a sign, fitting the architecture of the building, to identify the faith community that owns the church and that worships there. But no such sign exists.

However, there is somewhat of a makeshift sign, wholly unlike the architecture and building material of the church. It unmistakably identifies the building as a “boxing academy” — offering both basic and advanced training.

A question immediately arises: How can a place dedicated to worship become a place dedicated to conflict? Did the congregation outgrow its place of worship and sell its former property? Is it thriving somewhere else? Or did this congregation lose sight of its purpose and end up on the scrap heap of history — its only public reminder of a re-purposed building?

One often hears casual thoughts about the church. The term “church” can be used in many ways. It may refer to:

- a building on the landscape
- a place to go to on Sabbath
- an employer
- one specific group among many different faith groups
- a worldwide organization

We often evaluate the church in terms of what it does for us when we attend its services or programs. We comment about the comfort of the pews/chairs, our like or dislike of the music, the length of the sermon, the level of interest in Sabbath School, and whether the social atmosphere is one of friendliness or aloofness. One member said, “My church is like an airplane. There are not enough window and aisle seats.”

What is the use of the church? The answer to that question, at least according to scripture, is not so much what the church does for us but rather with what it does for God.

When we begin to understand this, we move from a self-centered view of the church to a God-centered awareness that the church is created by God for His own purposes — and that you and I, the person sitting next to you, the one in the back row, those who come early and those who come late, the old and the young, are all part of a grand design.

Perhaps we could say it this way, “God doesn’t have a mission for the Church; He has a Church for His mission!” When we understand this, the individual and congregational life becomes much more than a continual struggle to cultivate a list of virtues and avoid a list of vices. We begin to view the church as the representation and demonstration of God in this world.

Let’s consider the purpose of the Church in four different, yet interrelated, dimensions.

1. The Purpose of the Church—to bring attention to God.

This idea is actually a theme in scripture. Paul wrote about it in the letter to Ephesians (3:8-10). See also Colossians 3:17 and Galatians 1:15-17. Jesus spoke about it (Matthew 5:16). Peter affirmed it (1 Peter 2:9). The prophets proclaimed it (see Isaiah 42:5-7 and Zechariah 8:23).

Zechariah came on the scene when God’s people were recovering from a degrading exile. They needed to recover a sense of purpose as they sorted out the difference between making a living and having a life. The prophet painted a gripping portrait of how they could understand their role in history.

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you'" —(Zechariah 8:23. NIV).

Zechariah's vision is a stunning picture of evangelism. The ones who do the talking are the evangelized not the evangelists. Those who come seeking the companionship of a Jew are convinced by what they have heard concerning God. It is the whereabouts of God that attracts them. The presence of God is seen in the life and worship of the Jewish nation — and this is noticed by people from every tribe and tongue and nation. Zechariah's challenge is for the people to recognize their calling to bring attention to God.

What might happen in our faith community if the world really did see the dramatic difference that God makes in all human relationships? Is it right to expect that as a result of Jesus in their lives, God's people would be the holiest, happiest, healthiest, most peaceful, and most helpful people on the planet? Is this not what Jesus meant when He said that He came that people might have life and have it more abundantly?

Would it be, as in the days of Jesus, that people would tear the walls and roof apart in order to get into a community where God is present?

The purpose of eyeglasses is to enable the wearer to see clearly. It is not the purpose of the glasses to be seen, but rather to help one to see everything else clearly. Similarly, the purpose of the church is to be the lens through which the world sees God clearly. The church does not bring attention to itself, instead it provides a correct picture of God.

Perhaps this thought could be woven into our Church mission statement — "The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to present to the world a clear picture of God." Oh, that every member of our faith community saw this as the defining purpose, the unchanging reference for our individual and collective life.

The apostle Paul wrote to Titus concerning the behavior of slaves so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive. (See Titus 2:9-10.)

*"The world cannot possibly begin to believe in the reality of an unseen God, extravagant in mercy, lavish in goodness, bent on redeeming and reconciling and restoring creation, until our churches are living object lessons of this very thing."*¹

This idea, bringing attention to God, is also a theme in the writings of Ellen White. She wrote frequently and poignantly about it.

*"Our great work is to reveal Christ to the world, and thus reveal the Father."*²

*"Christians are set as light bearers on the way to heaven. They are to reflect to the world the light shining upon them from Christ. Their life and character should be such that through them others will get a right conception of Christ and of His service."*³

¹ Mark Buchanan, *Your Church Is Too Safe*, p. 170.

² Ellen G White, *The Review and Herald*, January 31, 1893 par. 5.

³ Ellen G White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 116.

2. The Purpose of the Church — to be the classroom of discipleship training, to demonstrate the power of God to change lives.

One of the main emphases we make in the proclamation of the gospel is that God in Jesus Christ has forgiven our sins. But we must never stop there. What we really need to be proclaiming as well as demonstrating is that the salvation offered to us, provided for us, is salvation from slavery to sin. Jesus did not die to save us only from the punishment of our sins but from the domination of our sins.

“...you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21, NKJV).

The discipling role of the church is to help us understand that the gospel is not just a set of beliefs but a power that changes us profoundly and continually. And we do need change.

The Church, under the power of God’s grace, is the place where our lives are re-wired, re-built, and re-purposed.

For some of us, the gospel introduces a confrontation with our habits. For others, it challenges our attitudes. For all of us, the gospel initiates warfare with our idols and our self-centeredness. A true understanding of the gospel introduces us to a deeper happiness than can be found anywhere in life. The apostle Paul makes it practical.

“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above...Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God...Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry...But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another...” (Colossians 3:1-9, NKJV).

The hard reality of the gospel is that it reframes everything in our lives. We may accept Jesus as Lord on the basis of gratitude for His forgiveness of our past, but day by day His lordship in our lives leads us to new territory that is to be claimed for Him. We discover there are new ways of thinking. We learn to use our eyes, ears, voices, and hands differently. The lordship of Jesus makes new claims upon how we use our time, energy, and resources. This doesn’t happen overnight — we grow in the life of discipleship.

The Church is a classroom for training. It is in this community of faith that we learn the life of discipleship and through the Holy Spirit’s power, we experience the transformation of values, habits, appetites, relationships, and attitudes. It is in the Church that we learn how to develop and use our skills and talents for God’s mission.

3. The Purpose of the Church — to demonstrate how redeemed people live in community.

This is where things get difficult. When God calls us, He calls us to live our lives as part of a community — the Church which the Bible describes as the body of Christ (see Ephesians 1:23).

*“...the truth is that the wholeness which God is working to achieve is never complete in an individual, but through individuals living together as one body, each supplying the deficiencies of the others.”*⁴

⁴ J. B. Phillips (1906-1982), *Making Men Whole*, London: Highway Press, 1952, p. 66.

A spiritual life is demonstrated in relationships. Old Testament prophets drew attention to the pretense of religion — the idea that our words and actions toward God have little relationship to how we live the rest of our lives. (See Malachi 1:10-14 and Jeremiah 22:11-18.)

How often throughout history have faith communities walked in the same path? They have isolated religion to a vertical relationship — something between God and oneself. But the reality is that a relationship with God cannot be confined to one's private life; it must invade horizontal relationships.

Thus, in the church I find myself journeying along the road of discipleship in company with many others. And I discover just how challenging it is to live as a member of a new community where relationships are no longer demarcated by nationality, culture, economics, political affiliation, or gender roles. The church is an entirely new kind of community.

It is cross-cultural, multi-cultural, counter-cultural, and trans-cultural. A place where the upside down priorities of the beatitudes operate. Where service is more important than status, where humility trumps hubris, where love is expressed instead of lust, and where collaboration replaces competition.

Paul's admonition to the churches under his care embraced new dimensions of every human relationship: husband and wife, parents and children, employers and employees, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, wise and otherwise. The church is an illustration of transformed relationships of every kind — a kingdom community.

This kind of community living can be very challenging. And because it is so difficult, we often live under costumes and masks that hide our real selves. And when we come together on Sabbaths, with pressed suits and ties (for men), carrying the Holy Book, the hymn book, and the pocket book, we are often unable to be real with each other.

What would happen in the local church if a person came on Sabbath with clothes reeking of alcohol and tobacco? If a young person with tattoos and body metal exposed came looking for a place to sit? If an unwed mother asked for financial assistance? How would a redeemed community respond to these challenges?

4. The Purpose of the Church — to partner with God in His mission in this world, to be a healing/reconciling presence in His name.

Christians are sent into the world — not to retreat from it. Is it possible that our faith community has only heard part of God's message — the part that beckons us to come out of the world? So, to a lesser or greater extent, we have isolated ourselves from the world. But the truth of the matter is that we are 'called out' from the world and then 'sent in' to the world, for the purpose of God is to save the world not just the church.

And in this endeavor Jesus is our example. The whole spectrum of society received His attention and care. He gave attention to those most overlooked by society: children, the poor, the sick, those maimed or mentally challenged, and sinners of the worst kind. (See Matthew 4:23, 24 and Luke 15:1-2.) In the minds of many, His reputation was sullied by the time and attention He gave to those society had marginalized. But among them all Jesus appears to have special regard for the least, the lost, the last, the lowest, and the left-out.

Jesus ministered to the demon-possessed and the disfigured. He healed withered limbs and wounded spirits. The blind, deaf, and dumb were recipients of His tender mercies. In short Jesus identified with and ministered to human need.

“For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me’” (Matthew 25:35-40, NKJV).

It has been a weakness of religions that they care more for religion than for humanity. One of the chief ways that Jesus expressed His religion is seen in the way He cared for suffering humanity.

Old Testament prophets (Hosea, Amos and Isaiah, among others) presented God’s displeasure over a distorted religion. He was tired of sacrifices and religious rituals that were not accompanied by a social conscience for justice, mercy, humility, and care for the poor. The smoke of burnt offerings was a stench in His nostrils because worshippers deliberately or carelessly compartmentalized their service to God as unconnected with their daily living.

Hosea declares God’s rebuke:

“For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6, NKJV).

The prophet Amos captures the voice of God with even greater force:

“I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream” (Amos 5:21-24, NKJV).

Earlier verses in Amos Five detail some of the moral and social failures of God’s people. The intensity of their worship did not match the intentionality of their living.

One must be careful about assuming that the issues addressed by the prophets in Old Testament times are exactly the same as the things we see today. But surely we can agree that, as in Old Testament times, there are people who are marginalized in our society — people suffering from brokenness, failure, fear, isolation, and hopelessness. It is among people such as these that the church is to find its mission field. Our ministry in this world is not just in the realm of ideas and doctrines. It is also, perhaps more so, to be demonstrated in acts of mercy, justice, and fairness.

There are two ways of falling short in our understanding of mission: One is to concentrate on its spiritual significance and marginalize the political, economic, and social dimensions. The other is to concentrate so much on its political, economic, and social dimensions that the spiritual dimension is lost from sight.

We must be careful lest we buy into the idea that the markers of religious life are Bible study, prayer, and witnessing. This is an incomplete list. What is missing is service.

For the church to fulfill its purpose of partnering with God in His mission, we need to sense the consecration of every 'calling,' of every kind of work that is done for the sake of human community and the mission of God in this world. We must reject the idea that ministerial work is more holy than teaching math or fixing machinery or selling vegetables. Every workplace is a place of mission, every relationship an opportunity to reveal the grace of God.

We must take care lest we fall victim to the idea that we serve God best when we are in church, when we are praying or reading the Bible, or giving Bible studies or handing out tracts and that our work during the week is merely a necessity to provide resources to serve Him when we have completed our allotted task or shift of duty. Our daily work is ultimately an act of worship to the God who called us and who equipped us to do it.

There is no hierarchy of spiritual professions. When it comes to the mission of God, the preacher or Bible worker is no more important than the taxi driver, housewife, or parking lot attendant. God invites all His children to join Him in service to the world. This includes:

men and women
boys and girls
the educated and the illiterate
the poor and the rich
lawyers and bricklayers
accountants and athletes
mechanics and masons
cheerleaders and car drivers
plumbers and politicians
executives and managers
ministers and laymembers

In other words, THE WHOLE CHURCH!

Conclusion:

The purpose of the church is to reveal God to the world, to be a classroom of discipleship training, to demonstrate how redeemed people live in community, and to partner with God in His mission.

What an awesome challenge!

What an amazing privilege!

What an energizing objective!

Let us give Him our best!
