

Growing in Christ

The Church: In Service to Humanity

Lesson #8 for November 24, 2012

Scriptures: Roman 16:5; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Peter 2:9; Matthew 28:19,20; John 17:21,22; Acts 15:1-29; Ephesians 2:19-22.

1. In this lesson we will discuss the role of the church and how the church is to grow by fulfilling God's purpose for it. What does the church mean to you? Do we need the church?
2. Read 1 Peter 2:9. We are called to be God's special people, a royal, even kingly, priesthood, and a holy people. God has always wanted that kind of relationship. See Exodus 19:5,6; Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2. (*Peculiar* in the *King James Version* means a special, private possession.)
3. When Jesus had finished His work after being crucified and rising from the grave and as He was ready to ascend to heaven, He instructed His disciples to go, make disciples, baptize, and teach people true Christian obedience. (Matthew 28:19,20) How successful have we been in doing that? Why are we still here?
4. In His prayer before His crucifixion, Jesus Himself said that the goal is for us to be one with Him as He is one with the Father. (John 17:20,21) Does that seem like an impossible goal? Is this a continuous, everlasting goal? What would happen if we could accomplish it? Could a human being be as close to the Son and the Father as He is to Jesus?
5. If this has always been God's goal, how successful has He been? He started out with Adam and Eve. Soon, He used a flood to drown the whole world except for eight people; He started over with Noah. Soon, He had to confuse the languages at the tower of Babel. Not long thereafter, He had to start over by calling Abraham out of Ur to go to Haran and then to Palestine. After some 1800 years, He made His last appeal to those people and then had to turn to the newly established Christian church, working through His small group of disciples. Working under very difficult circumstances, that group grew very rapidly until it was made the official church of the Roman Empire; and then it fell into bad times. Finally, God made the Bible available in the languages of Europe through the efforts of Martin Luther, William Tyndale, etc., and the Protestant Reformation took hold. But 300 years later, God decided it was necessary to call a group from among those Protestant churches to form the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Based on history, does it seem like our chances for success are good? Or, very limited? How successful have we been?
6. What is the ultimate role of the church in the world? Is the church supposed to be a private club for saints? Or, a hospital for sinners? Ellen White commented:

We should remember that the church, enfeebled and defective though it be, is the only object on earth on which Christ bestows His supreme regard. He is constantly watching it with solicitude, and is strengthening it by His Holy Spirit.—*Manuscript* 155, 1902. (Nov. 22, 1902); *2SM* 396.2; compare *AA* 12.1; *AG* 338.4; *HP* 284.2; *TM* 45,49 (1893); *LDE* 52.2; 58.3; *OHC* 172.2
7. It has always been God's hope that His special people would take the task of correctly representing Him to the world seriously and, thus, have a major impact on the entire world.
8. How does the New Testament define *church*? When the Jews came together as a group to worship, they were called a *synagogue*. In Latin that would be a *congregation*—a gathering together. But, that is not the word the New Testament uses for God's people.

They were called an *ekklesia*—those who are “called out” or are “called forth” to be God’s special people. Remember, that was always God’s hope for His people. (Exodus 19:5,6)

9. We use the word *church* in many ways. We say *church* meaning the building where we meet each Sabbath. We even say *church* referring to the worship service which follows Sabbath school. We say *church* referring to the local congregation. We sometimes use *church* to refer to the organization—particularly the General Conference. And we refer to the Seventh-day Adventist denomination as our church to distinguish it from other church groups. So, when we use the word *church*, we need to be careful to designate what we mean by that term. There are other uses of the word *church* as well.
10. The Bible describes the church as “the people of God.” (Exodus 19:5,6; 1 Peter 2:9; Deuteronomy 14:2) The church belongs to Christ; and if you truly belong to Christ, you are a descendent of Abraham. (Galatians 3:29) There is no discrimination. (Galatians 3:28)
11. The church is also described as “the body of Christ.” (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:27; and Ephesians 1:19-23) Paul went to considerable length to describe how the different parts of the body are made to work together just as the different members of the church are to form one body, “the body of Christ.” There is to be unity in diversity. What is the work of this body of Christ? Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-17. Not all of us are given the same task. We have very different roles to play, but the collective goal of the church is to finish the gospel of Christ.
12. Thus, we see that the *church* also means mission. The church is not just a place where we go to worship once a week. Jesus made it clear that we are to go, make disciples, baptize, and teach all things to new believers. (Matthew 28:19,20) Even the names that are used for God’s special individuals down through history imply that kind of mission. *Apostles* are people who are sent out to do a mission. The Latin equivalent is *missionary*. *Prophets* are people who speak for God as ambassadors. (Jeremiah 7:25; Luke 9:1,2; 10:1,9) Jesus stated that we are to be sent out to accomplish a work just as He was sent by the Father. (John 20:21)
13. Read Ephesians 4:7-16. What is the purpose of the church as set forth in these verses? We are to assist—in whatever way we are gifted—to build up the body of Christ until we become mature to the very height of Christ’s full stature so that we cannot be tossed about by every wind of doctrine. We are to be sealed both “intellectually and spiritually.” (4BC 1161.6)
14. Any organism that does not grow is dead. The same could be said of the church. There are many things to which the church could address itself. There are many problems in society which call for social reform. But, we have one central focus, and that is to prepare a people for the second coming of Christ. How involved are we as a church or as a Sabbath school class in this major challenge?
15. Just as the body has diverse parts but it all works together, diversity will always be present in the church. Nevertheless, the church is to be united in its mission. We are to be “the people of God,” the “body of Christ,” and the “Temple of the Holy Spirit.” Those of us who have been in the church longer are to help the newer members. (Romans 14,15)
16. Read 1 Corinthians 1:10 and 2 Corinthians 13:11. None of us alone can carry out all the work of the church. We need the cooperation of the entire church body. So, how do we get diverse people to work together in unity? It is only through the love of God learned and practiced in our own lives that this is possible.

17. In any group that is to accomplish a goal of any sort, there must be some kind of organization. Ultimately, some person or group of persons must be in charge. What happens when you put people in charge of others? The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a representative system of church governance. These church representatives are supposed to follow the plans set forth by God in Scripture in guiding and directing the church.
18. Read Acts 15:1-29. It is important to notice in these verses that Paul and Barnabas were vigorously opposed by some who had been Pharisees and who had become Christians. Those Pharisees were determined to require all new Christians to become fully Jewish—following all the Jewish ceremonial requirements—before they could become Christians. The “general conference committee” meeting in Jerusalem decided that not all Jewish rules needed to be followed but that it was necessary to avoid eating meat offered to idols. These were rules for how to get along in the church! And they claimed that they and the Holy Spirit had agreed on them! It is important to notice that they did not mention circumcision, and they dropped hundreds of rules promoted by the Pharisees.
19. However, when Paul returned to the distant fields of Corinth and was writing to his friends in Rome, (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8&10) he made it clear that the ceremonial restrictions that he had thought were so important when he was a Pharisee no longer applied to Christians. This brought him into conflict with church leadership and ultimately resulted in his imprisonment in Jerusalem and spending most of the rest of his life in prison. Ellen White suggested that in this case Paul was in the right and church leadership was wrong and that Paul should not have compromised with church leaders! (*Acts the Apostles* p. 405) Were those church leaders repentant enough to visit Paul while he was in prison not too far from Jerusalem for more than two years?
20. The best teachers and the best church leaders are always those who are servant-leaders. True Christians will humbly perform whatever task is given them and will perform it with an attitude of love.
21. But, what happens if someone believes that s/he knows better and can perform better than all others and, therefore, should be leader of a local church or even a larger group?

The spirit of domination is extending to the presidents of our conferences. If a man is sanguine of his own powers and seeks to exercise dominion over his brethren, feeling that he is invested with authority to make his will the ruling power, the best and only safe course is to remove him, lest great harm be done and he lose his own soul and imperil the souls of others. “All ye are brethren.” This disposition to lord it over God’s heritage will cause a reaction unless these men change their course. Those in authority should manifest the spirit of Christ. They should deal as He would deal with every case that requires attention. They should go weighted with the Holy Spirit. A man’s position does not make him one jot or tittle greater in the sight of God; it is character alone that God values. —Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, p. 362.1

There were centuries when the church was totally dominant over society. What do we call that time? The Dark Ages!

22. How successful have we been as a church in accomplishing the goal Christ has given us? The simple answer is: We are still here! Jesus explained why that is in His parable of the wheat and the tares. (Matthew 13:24-30) Sometimes, the church must take action against

members who are defeating the overall goals of the church. (Titus 3:10,11; Romans 16:17)

23. How should we relate to individuals or groups who believe that something is wrong with the church and so they separate themselves and perhaps even try to start a private ministry or a new church? The church is never the private property of any individual. One person has described the issue of how to deal with problems in the church as follows: "You can't clean a house from the outside."
24. Those who are familiar with the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church know that we have had our rough times. What happened in 1888? Read *1 Selected Messages* 233-235. The General Conference in session turned off the latter rain! A much less familiar church meeting was held in 1919 after Ellen White died. That meeting was to discuss the role that her writings should play in the church. While the conference concluded that it was the responsibility of leadership to go home and carefully teach and explain to church members exactly how inspiration works, that task was largely ignored. (Read the introduction to *The Great Controversy*)
25. We have been told repeatedly that Christ is to be the "head of the church," "the chief cornerstone," etc. (Ephesians 2:20-22) What is implied by this idea? The church is not only a place for individuals to belong but also a group organization. If we are to take our task seriously, we should be preparing people as quickly as we can for the second coming of Jesus Christ. New members who enter the church give new life to the whole group. Those new members need to be nurtured one-on-one so as to become true disciples. This means teaching them the importance of Bible study as well as methods that can be used for Bible study. Unfortunately, the church has had problems retaining not only new members but also even our own young people. Why do you think that is?
26. Read Ephesians 4:11-16. These verses set forth very clearly the role that God intends for the church to play in the world. What would happen if a significant group of church members became so settled into the truth both intellectually and spiritually so that they could not be moved. (4BC 1161.6) They could not be tossed around by every wind of doctrine. The church's ultimate goal is exactly that. But, this is not a casual touch, or an on-and-off, once-a-week kind of process. To really disciple a new member, s/he should be taken under the wing of one or more church members and really brought into the family of God. A new member needs to be associated with others who are correctly practicing the principles of Seventh-day Adventist Christianity. This kind of change is "caught" and not just taught.

Disciples cannot be mass-produced. We cannot draw people into a "program" and see disciples emerge at the end of the production line. It takes time to make disciples. It takes individual personal attention.—*The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 45,46

27. Are we prepared to take on this kind of responsibility? If not, the task will be left to future generations. Do we want to be responsible for further delaying the second coming of Jesus Christ? (Matthew 24:14; 2 Peter 3:9-12)

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