

The Church: Her Purpose and Commission

By means of the church in the present age, God is now making known His wisdom and manifesting His grace to the angelic host (Eph. 3:10). In heaven the church will eternally be the illustration of what the grace of God can do (Eph. 2:7). Strictly speaking, however, the divine commission of the church is given to individual believers rather than to the corporate body. Christ as the Head of the church is able to direct each believer in the paths of the Lord's will in keeping with His personal gifts and the plan of God for the individual life. All of this, however, is in harmony with God's general purpose for the church in the present age. In the church corporately, God is fulfilling a present divine purpose which is unfolding exactly as prophesied in the Scriptures.

A. The Present Divine Purpose in the World

The present divine purpose of this age is not the conversion of the world, but rather the calling out from the world those who

will believe in Christ to form the body of Christ which is the church. It is true that the world will be converted, and there is yet to be a kingdom of righteousness in the earth; but according to the Bible, that day of a transformed earth, far from being the result of Christian service, is said to follow rather than precede the return of Christ, and is said to be made possible only by His personal presence and immediate power.

It is *after* the smiting of the Stone — a symbol of the return of Christ — that the God of heaven sets up an everlasting kingdom in the earth (Dan. 2:44-45). It is *after* the Lord returns and sits on the throne of His glory that He directs the sheep on His right hand to enter the earthly kingdom prepared for them (Matt. 25:31-34). In like manner, it is *after* He is seen descending from heaven that Christ reigns a thousand years on the earth (Rev. 19:11 — 20:9; cf. Acts 15:13-19; 1 Cor. 15:20-25).

When anticipating the peculiar features of this age (Matt. 13:1-50), the Lord made mention of three major characteristics: (1) Israel's place in the world would be as a treasure hid in the field (Matt. 13:44); (2) evil would continue to the end of the age (Matt. 13:4, 25, 33, 48); and (3) the children of the kingdom — who are likened to wheat, to a pearl of great cost, and to good fish — shall be gathered out (Matt. 13:30, 45, 46, 48).

Of these three characteristics of the age, it is disclosed that the last, or the gathering out of the children of the kingdom, constitutes the supreme purpose of God in this age. In accordance with this, it is stated in Romans 11:25 that Israel's present blindness is only "until" the completion of the church (note Eph. 1:22-23), the end of the age of special Gentile blessing.

Likewise, the mystery of iniquity," or evil in the present age, is declared to continue, though restrained, until the Restrainer — the Spirit of God — is taken out of the way (2 Thess. 2:7). As the Spirit will depart only when He has completed the calling out of the church, the immediate purpose of God is not the correction of the evil in the world, but the out-calling of all who will believe. Israel's covenants will yet be fulfilled (Rom. 11:27), and evil will be banished from the earth (Rev. 21:1); but the present purpose of God, for which all else evidently awaits, is the completion of the church.

In Acts 15:13-19 the substance of James's address at the conclusion of the first council of the church in Jerusalem is given. The occasion of this council was to determine this same question

as to the present purpose of God. The early church comprised largely Jews, and these were confused with regard to their own national position in the light of the fact that the new gospel was flowing out to Gentiles. James states that, according to Peter's experience in the house of Cornelius the Gentile, God is first visiting Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. "After this," James continues, the Lord will return and then will fulfill all His purposes for Israel and the Gentiles.

The practical bearing of all this upon the subject of this study is that, in the present age, never is the individual believer (much less the church) appointed of God to a world-improvement program; but the believer is called to be a witness in all the world to Christ and His saving grace, and through this ministry of gospel preaching the Spirit of God will accomplish the supreme divine purpose in the age.

B. The Formation of the Church

Christ prophesied that He would *build* His church (Matt. 16:18), and the Apostle Paul likened the church to a structure of living stones growing "unto an holy temple in the Lord" and "builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph. 2:21-22). Likewise, the believer's ministry of soul-winning and edification of the body of Christ continues, not forever, but "till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). The "stature of the fulness of Christ" does not refer to the development of Christlike men, but rather to the development of the body of Christ to its completion (Eph. 1:22-23). The same aspect of truth is restated in Ephesians 4:16, where the members of the body, like living cells in the human body, are represented as being unceasingly active in soul-winning and are thereby making "increase of the body."

C. The Believer's Commission

Christ gave a prediction that the seed-sowing which is to characterize the present age would result in but a fourth portion becoming "wheat" (Matt. 13:1-23). Nevertheless, though the

preaching of the gospel relates to death as well as to life (2 Cor. 2:16), the child of God is commissioned to be instant in season and out of season in his efforts to win the lost. He is appointed to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15), knowing that faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). It is also stated in 2 Corinthians 5:19 that God who was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, has committed to us the word of reconciliation. "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20).

This ministry rests upon every believer alike and may be exercised in many ways.

1. *The Gospel may be presented to the unsaved through sacrificial gifts.* Evidently there are many earnest believers who would rejoice to win a soul for Christ who have not awakened to the effectiveness of giving their substance to this end. The messenger cannot go except he be sent, but the one who sends him is a partner in the service and has taken stock which will pay eternal dividends.

2. *The Gospel may be presented to the unsaved in answer to prayer.* He who has said "If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it" (John 14:14) will certainly thrust laborers into the harvest in answer to prayer. It is easily proven that there is no more fruitful ministry possible to the child of God than prayer; yet how very few seem to realize that souls are saved through that service.

3. *The Gospel may be presented to the unsaved by word of mouth.* Since all are commissioned to this task, there are certain imperative conditions to be observed: (a) the messenger must be willing to be placed where the Spirit wills; (b) the messenger should be instructed as to the precise truths which constitute the gospel of grace which he is appointed to declare; (c) the messenger must be Spirit-filled, else he will lack that impelling passion for the lost which alone prompts one to fearless and tireless soul-winning service. "After that the Holy Ghost is come upon you," Christ said, ". . . ye shall be witnesses unto me" (Acts 1:8). Apart from this filling, there will be no disposition to witness. But, being filled, there is no staying the outflow of divine compassion (Acts 4:20).

4. *The Gospel may be also presented by various mechanical means such as literature, the radio, television, and sacred music.*

Regardless of means, the truth must be presented in such a way that the Holy Spirit can use it.

5. *Undoubtedly, God uses many other means to promote the Gospel such as educational institutions where men are trained to preach, missionary aviation which serves to transport men who are carrying the Gospel, and the printed page.* Although every Christian may not be equally effectual in preaching the Gospel directly, every Christian bears a portion of the responsibility of seeing to it that the Gospel is preached to every creature.

Questions

1. How is the church related to manifesting the grace of God?
2. Who directs each believer in the path of the Lord's will?
3. Contrast the purpose of God in the present age with His purpose in the millennial kingdom.
4. What is necessary before the world can be converted?
5. Name the three major characteristics which form the peculiar features of this age according to Matthew 13.
6. What will be some of the immediate results for Israel and the world when God's present purpose for the church is completed at the Rapture?
7. According to Acts 15, what is the order of God's program for blessing on Gentiles and blessing on the Jews?
8. Describe God's present purpose in building His church.
9. What is the believer's present commission?
10. Name the various ways by which a believer can exercise his privilege of extending the Gospel to the world.
11. What are some of the basic conditions for being an effective messenger of the Gospel?
12. In what sense is every Christian responsible for preaching the Gospel to every creature?