

The Church: In Service *to* Humanity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Pet. 2:9; Matt. 28:19, 20; John 17:21, 22; Acts 15:1–29.*

Memory Text: “These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (*1 Timothy 3:14, 15, NKJV*).

Key Thought: “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.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, p. 396.

For many, church isn't what it used to be (whatever that was). Some people even talk about “a churchless Christianity,” a concept that is self-contradictory. Others rail against “organized religion” (what is better, “disorganized religion”?). The Bible teaches, clearly, about the importance of the church. It's not an option; it's a crucial component in the plan of salvation. No wonder, then, that as the great controversy unfolds, Satan works so hard against it, especially because the church is one important means by which sinners are brought into contact with God's offer of salvation. The church, wrote Paul, was “the house of God,” even “the pillar and ground of the truth” (*1 Tim. 3:15, NKJV*). The church is not a human invention; it was created by God for the purposes of bringing erring sinners into a saving relationship with Him.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 24.*

Nature of the Church: Part 1

When we speak about the nature of something, we are usually interested in its origins, function, and purpose. Besides providing several images to depict the church, the Bible uses a particular word in reference to it, *ecclesia*, which means “called out” or “called forth.” In secular Greek life the word was used primarily to describe a group of citizens who had been called out from their homes into a public place for an assembly or gathering. The New Testament uses the word in this general sense.

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (called the Septuagint), the “congregation” of Israel, especially when gathered before the Lord for religious purposes, is referred to as *ecclesia*.

The Jews were “called out” to be God’s special people, but the early Christians may have used the word to identify those Jews and Gentiles who, as recipients of God’s grace, had been called out to be Christ’s witnesses. In the New Testament, the church describes the company of the faithful the world over. It’s important to note that the word *ecclesia* is never used with reference to a building in which public worship is conducted. Equally significant is that whereas the word *synagogue* originally denoted an assembly of people gathered for a specific purpose, the Christians preferred to use the word *ecclesia*. Nevertheless, both words indicate that the New Testament church was in historical continuity with the Old Testament church, the “congregation” of Israel (*Acts 7:38*).

The word *ecclesia* indicates, in general terms, a group of people called out through God’s initiative. How does this explain Paul’s use of the word at three different levels: (i) the church in individual homes (*Rom. 16:5, 1 Cor. 16:19*); (ii) the church in specific cities (*1 Cor. 1:2, Gal. 1:2*); and (iii) the church in larger geographical areas (*Acts 9:31*)?

Ecclesia is the depiction of any group of people gathered together who share in a saving relationship with Christ. This means that individual congregations are not just a part of the whole church; each unit represents the whole. Furthermore, the church is one throughout the whole world but at the same time present in each assembly.

Think about your local church, which functions as a representative of God’s whole church. What kind of responsibilities does that place on you as part of the church body and on the local church itself?

Nature of the Church: Part 2

Besides the word *ecclesia* itself, the New Testament describes the church with several images that further explain its nature and function. Today we will look at just two crucial concepts regarding the church: the church as the people of God and the church as the body of Christ.

1. The “people of God” as a concept is applied in the Bible to the children of Israel (*Deut. 14:2*). Read 1 Peter 2:9, where the concept is clearly applied to Christians. How are we to understand what this means for us today?

Notice that even as the concept is applied to Christians, it is still used to describe the nation of Israel (*Luke 1:68; Rom. 11:1, 2*). Evidently the New Testament applies the concept to the church in a way that suggests continuity and consummation. (*See Gal. 3:29.*)

2. “Body of Christ”—Romans 12:5, 1 Corinthians 12:27, and Ephesians 1:22, 23 depict the church as the body of Christ. How do these texts help us to understand better its nature and function?

Numerous ideas can be found within these texts, perhaps the most obvious one being the unity (see Wednesday’s lesson) that should be seen in the church. This is an idea expressed elsewhere in the New Testament, especially in 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul writes: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?” (*1 Cor. 12:12–17*).

Some people suffer from what are known as auto-immune diseases: their own immune system, which is supposed to protect the body, attacks it instead. Think about the implications of this analogy for the church as “the body of Christ.”

The Mission of the Church

The church as “the body of Christ” means that the church is to do what Christ would do if He were still on the earth “bodily.” It is for this reason that the church as an “assembly” has been called out. The church does not simply have a mission; the church is mission.

Read Matthew 28:19, 20. How does it address the issue of the church’s mission?

Mission involves sending people out to speak for God. It is what God Himself did with the prophets of Israel (*Jer. 7:25*) and with the apostles (*Luke 9:1, 2; 10:1, 9*). Jesus also sent out His disciples just as the Father had sent Him (*John 20:21*). The church today can do no less and still remain faithful to its calling.

What do the following texts also teach us about the church’s mission? *Eph. 4:11–13, Matt. 10:5–8, James 1:27, Eph. 1:6, and 1 Pet. 2:9.*

Clearly, evangelism is central to the mission of the church. The church exists also for the edification of believers, for the promotion of true worship, and for engagement in matters of social concern.

Though the church faces many challenges, one of the most difficult is to keep a proper balance in its understanding of mission. On one hand, it would be so easy to get caught up in social reform and in working for the betterment of society and its ills. While that work is important, in and of itself, it must never be allowed to swallow up the ultimate mission of the church, which is to reach the lost for Jesus and to prepare people for His return. At the same time, too, we need to avoid the extreme of living as if every headline signaled the end of the world and thus neglect the basic tasks of daily life. We need divine wisdom in order to know how to strike the right balance.

How involved are you in the mission of the church? In what way could you do more than you are doing? Why is it important for your own spiritual growth to be involved in the church’s calling?

Unity of the Church

The church—depicted as the “called out” of God, the “people of God,” the “body of Christ,” and the “temple of the Holy Spirit”—is fitted for service or mission. Unity is essential to the church because without it the church cannot successfully accomplish its mission. It is no wonder that the issue of unity was on Christ’s mind toward the close of His earthly life (*John 17:21, 22*).

Jesus prayed for the unity of the church (*John 17:21, 22*); Paul exhorted the believers about it (*Rom. 15:5, 6*). **How are we to understand unity as it is expressed in these texts? What does this unity mean?**

The unity that Christ prayed for and that Paul exhorted the believers to attain clearly involved a union of feeling, thought, action, and much more. It is not a harmony that is achieved through social engineering, diplomatic management, or political subterfuge. It is a gift bestowed upon believers by the indwelling Christ (*John 17:22, 23*) and kept by the power of God the Father (*John 17:11*).

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10 and 2 Corinthians 13:11. How are we to achieve what Paul calls for in these texts?

There is no question that we are all different people, and that we have different views regarding many things views that can at times make unity difficult. Though stresses and strains are inevitable at every level of the church, we all need to keep an attitude of humility, self-denial, and a desire for a good that is greater than ourselves. So many of the divisions that arise do so because of selfishness, pride, and a desire to exalt oneself and one’s views over others. None of us has it all right; none of us understands all things perfectly. Whatever the inevitable differences that will arise, were we all to daily take up our crosses, daily die to self, daily seek not only our own good but the good of others and the good of the church as a whole, so many of the problems with which we struggle and which hinder the work would vanish.

In short, unity begins with each one of us, individually, as followers of Christ—not just in name but in a life of true self-sacrifice, a life dedicated to a cause and a good greater than ourselves.

Governance of the Church

Governance means getting things done. This is true of general social life, and it is also true of church life. Governance also involves organization, which means the organizing of things into a functioning, coherent whole with rules, regulations, and structures designed to facilitate a task at hand. Authority is also critical to governance. At the practical level of church life, who has authority to authorize things and who can be authorized to do things? Different answers to these questions have led to different forms of church governance.

Seventh-day Adventists have a representative system of church governance. Ideally, leadership acts only as representatives, receiving delegated authority and responsibilities from the membership. It is not simply enough to show that a system of church governance is based on Scripture; the exercise of authority within the system must demonstrate sensitivity to biblical values.

Look at Acts 15:1–29. What can we learn from these verses about some key principles that are involved in church organization and governance?

Whatever we can learn from these verses about church governance, one point should be clear: church organization needs to be centered around advancing the spread of the gospel. Biblically, church governance is only as good as its promotion of mission and evangelism.

We need to remember, too, that though Christ exercises His authority through His church and its appointed officials, He has never handed over His power to them. He retains the headship of the church (*Eph. 1:22*). The early church was conscious of the fact that it could not exercise any authority independently of Christ and His word. In Acts 15:28 it was important to the assembly that what it decided “seemed good to the Holy Spirit” (*NKJV*), the true representative of Christ. Holders of offices in the church today cannot act differently.

Consider Matthew 20:24–28 and 23:8. What implication is there for the exercise of authority in the church at all levels?

How willing are you to serve others? Think deeply about your own motives and what they are in regard to what you do in the church, regardless of whatever position you might hold. What are these motives, and how can they be more in harmony with the principles revealed in the Word?

Further Study: Read Raoul Dederen, “The Church,” pp. 538–581, in Raoul Dederen (ed.), *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*; Ellen G. White, “Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me,” pp. 361–364, in *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*; “The Church the Light of the World,” pp. 455–467, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5.

“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. . . . This disposition to lord it over God’s heritage will cause a reaction unless these men change their course. . . . 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.

“The mission of the church of Christ is to save perishing sinners. It is to make known the love of God to men and to win them to Christ by the efficacy of that love. The truth for this time must be carried into the dark corners of the earth, and this work may begin at home.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 381.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 There is no question that the church, our church, has problems. Jesus explained it as such: “ ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away’ ” (*Matt. 13:24, 25, NIV*). Read the rest of the parable. How do we apply what Jesus said to our church about the way in which we deal with those who cause problems? Does this mean that there are no circumstances under which someone could be disfellowshipped? See, for instance, *Titus 3:10, 11* and *Rom. 16:17*.
- 2 What do you say to someone who, believing the church is corrupt, decides to pull away from the body as a whole and go it alone?
- 3 Our church affirms the notion of what has been called the “priesthood of all believers.” What does this idea include? What responsibilities does the idea carry for us?
- 4 Discuss in class some of the potential threats to our unity as a church. What issues have caused division in the church in the past? What can we learn from the past that can help to prevent similar things from happening in the future?

A Changed Heart

Fourteen-year-old Veresa [veh-REH-sah] listened as the doctor spoke to his parents. “Veresa has a hole in his heart. But surgery can repair his heart and help him live a normal life.” Veresa tried not to worry about the surgery; he just wanted to be well.

Veresa’s surgery was a success. His parents couldn’t stay with him while he recovered in the hospital, so his nurse stopped by often to chat. Veresa looked forward to her visits and enjoyed hearing her talk about Jesus and read him promises from the Bible.

Veresa had grown up attending church every Sunday, but he had never heard some of the things that his nurse talked about. One thing in particular stood out in his mind: the seventh day is the Sabbath day.

When Veresa returned home, he went to the nearby Seventh-day Adventist church. He wasn’t sure what his parents would think of his going to this church, so he didn’t tell them. Veresa met the pastor and asked him questions about the Sabbath and other things that his faithful nurse had taught him.

One day Veresa told his parents that he had been attending the Seventh-day Adventist church. They were stunned when he told them that he wanted to become a Seventh-day Adventist. “Why would you leave our church?” they asked. He tried to explain that he wasn’t leaving their church; he was following God’s way.

“If you insist on attending this church,” his father said, “then leave our home.” Sadly, Veresa packed his few clothes and his school books and walked to the Seventh-day Adventist church. He told the pastor that his parents had sent him away. “You can live with us,” the pastor said.

Veresa stayed with the pastor for several months, during which time he joined the church through baptism. Every Sabbath he walked by his family’s home on the way to and from church. He prayed for his parents, who refused to discuss his faith.

One day Veresa’s parents asked the pastor to send their son home. Gladly, Veresa returned home, and his parents welcomed him back. They didn’t try to change his mind about his beliefs. Veresa shared his faith with them, and his parents began keeping the Sabbath. But they have not made a decision to become Seventh-day Adventists.

“I hope that one day soon we can worship together again, this time in the Adventist faith,” Veresa says.

Pray for Veresa and his family. And remember that your mission offerings help to give people around the world an opportunity to hear God’s truths and accept His love into their lives.

VERESA shares his faith in Fiji, an island nation in the South Pacific.