

WHY WE EXIST AS A CHURCH

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It is a pleasure for me to be here tonight and if possible an even greater one to be able to speak to you on *Why We Exist As A Church*. If we lost sight of the mission of the church, then we fail to do what God expects and requires of his body in this world. In the third chapter of the book of Ephesians, Paul said, "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been his in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God. According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord:"

The church is the result of God's eternal purpose. This is what Paul states in verse 11, "According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord:" The manifestation of God's wisdom which had remained a mystery from eternity is now made known, Paul says, by the preaching of the gospel. And then in verse ten the first three words of that verse, "To the intent... ", that is, it was with this design that all things were made. One grand purpose in the creation of the universe was that the wisdom of God might be clearly shown by the church. Do you realize that it was not enough to evince God's wisdom by the mere formation of the sun, the moon, the stars and the planets. There was something, in the creation of this material universe, as we know it, with all its grandeur and all of its glory that could not fully evince and reveal the wisdom of God. Even the creation of intelligent beings did not fully reveal the wisdom of God Almighty. There were views of the divine character which could be obtained only in connection with the redemption of the world and thus it was the church that would make known the manifold wisdom of God in a way that it had never been made known before and give mankind a glimpse of that wisdom that could be had in no other way.

Thus Paul says, "To the intent... ", for which reason and with this design that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places, that is, the angelic host, which for ages had desired to look into this mystery of God's plan for redeeming the world but according to another writer were not permitted to do so. What the angels did not know, what the angels could not discover, what eye had not seen, what ear had not heard, what had never entered into the heart of man was now made known by the church. That is, God's many, variegated and manifold wisdom was now declared and made known by the arrangement of the church according to the purpose of the ages, so states the Apostle in verse 11. Thus we conclude that the church is the result of God's eternal purpose. It was not an accident, it was not an afterthought, it was not an interim arrangement that God provided because the Jews were unwilling to accept Him as Messiah and Lord but it was God's eternal purpose that the church should be established.

God is the supreme architect of this church. That implies a pattern and it implies a plan. The pattern is divine. It is the result of divine wisdom, the result of divine planning. This pattern also represents the divine will which cannot be disregarded. One idea so prevalent in the world today as I read not long ago in one religious paper, the writer said, "Would it surprise you if I suggested that there is no pattern?" Well, I deny that. There is a pattern. There has always been a pattern and the church was built according to God's pattern. There was a pattern when God gave Noah instructions to build the ark in Genesis 6:13-22. There was a pattern when God gave Moses instructions to build the tabernacle in Exodus 25:9-40. And Paul emphasizes in Heb. 8:15, that same principle obtains and applies today. Just as Moses was admonished according to God to make all things according to the pattern, just so, the church was a divine arrangement and it was built according to God's divine pattern. Which leads us to say that this divine plan for the church, in accomplishing God's purposes, is revealed in Ephesians, the fourth chapter, beginning at verse eight and continuing through verse thirteen.

"Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Not that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: 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 fullness of Christ:"

This is God's divine plan in accomplishing his divine purpose. Notice, the Bible says, "...he gave some, *apostles*; and some *prophets* ..." Theirs was the work of divine revelation in making known the will of God. We have their work preserved today by the providence of God in the New Testament and it is accessible to all men in its completed form. Now, we do not have descendents to the Apostles because as I've already pointed out, theirs was the work of revelation. Theirs was the work of inspiration and these inspired apostles and prophets, who revealed the will of God, no longer continue with us today. Because once their work was completed, once the will of God had been revealed, once it had been made known by inspiration and confirmed, then their work would necessarily cease. But not only did he give apostles, the Bible says he gave some evangelists. Now, theirs was the work basically and primarily of propagating the gospel. Then, he gave some; pastors and teachers. Their work was within the congregation. The pastors, the bishops, the elders, the presbyters all refer to the same group of men, whose work is described by the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Now, this was God's arrangement and after God had given apostles and prophets to reveal and after he had inspired them to reveal the word and the evangelist and pastors and teachers, who did their work, they were able to complete and carry out the plan of God in establishing the Church and making known the will of God in all the world.

I note today the tendency to sometimes get these mixed up and allow one to do the work of the other. This is never successful as far as God is concerned and I doubt very seriously as far as we are concerned, although sometimes temporary results may tend to lead us to believe or accept the contrary. I mean simply by that, that it seems there is a tendency among some churches to use the evangelist to do the work of pastors and teachers which you cannot and should not do. If he does his work of propagating the gospel, he will leave the work of edifying the body of Christ and building it up and strengthening and perfecting the saints to the pastors and teachers. Sometimes the pastors and teachers get the idea that they want to do the work of the evangelist and so they hike out and start trying to evangelize. May I suggest tonight that every man who is an evangelist and who is doing the work of an evangelist should do just that. Pastors and teachers should do their work within the limits of the congregation lest we get it mixed up and lest our work fail.

Now, divine wisdom has given this arrangement through which the church is to accomplish its divine mission. Those who were charged with the performance of these tasks in the early church, the Bible says, were given gifts in verse eight to make it possible for them to function according to the divine will until revelation was completed. I believe this is a very important principle that we need to realize. In order for them to function in the early days and infant stage of the church, the Bible says in verse eight, that they were given gifts. He gave gifts unto them. I understand that to mean spiritual gifts. These men, these apostles and prophets, even many of the early evangelists, pastors and teachers, were given spiritual gifts to aid them and to help them in doing the work that God had given them. But how long was this to last? Well, in verse thirteen it says, "Till (or until) we all come in the unity of the faith ..." Now, Robinson says that the word 'until' is "a particle serving to mark a termination both of place and time." It refers solely to the limit, implying that the action there terminates. Now then, men will be spiritually endowed, men will be helped until we reach a particular point and when that particular point is reached, then there will be a cessation of the gifts that aid these men. This point was reached according to the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians thirteen when "that which was perfect was come." He there

compares the church with his own childhood. He says, "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became as man, I put away childish things." Paul is saying the church is in its infancy and during its infancy it will need help and therefore there were tongues, there were prophecies and there was supernatural knowledge. Those people in the world today who are broadcasting throughout the length and breadth of our land that spiritual gifts are still in existence, writing in the papers that when that which is perfect is come refers to Christ or the end of the world are merely trying to perpetuate a thing that has ended long, long ago. Maybe I shouldn't use the word perpetuate, they are trying to revive a thing that ended long, long ago.

When you brethren built this building, you put up scaffolding on the outside until it was completed and when the building was completed the scaffolding was taken down because it was no longer of use. During the early years of the church, scaffolding was needed, aids were needed, supernatural, spiritual gifts were needed but when revelation was complete and when the complete revealed word of God was made known, then this was no longer needed.

McKnight, in his paraphrase of these verses, renders them as follows:

"And he appointed some, indeed, apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors, and teachers, and bestowed on them the supernatural gifts of inspiration, prophecy, miracles, languages; and on some the power of communicating these gifts to others. To enable them to fit the saints, even the believing Jews and Gentiles, for the ordinary work of the ministry, in order to the building of the body of Christ, which is the church, by converting unbelievers in every age. These supernaturally endowed teachers are to continue in the church, until, being fully instructed by their discourses and writings, we all, who compose the church, come, through, one faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to perfect man-hood as a church even to the measure of the stature which when full grown it ought to have; so that the church, thus instructed and enlarged, is able to direct and defend itself without supernatural aids. So that, having recourse at all times to their writings, we may no longer be children, who having no sure guide are tossed like a ship by waves."

I don't know of anybody that ever said it any better than that, because that's exactly what Paul teaches. He teaches that there is coming a time when we will have their discourses and their writings in our hands so that there is no longer a need for us to be cast about to and fro inferring that there was period of time when these supernatural gifts were used to steady and anchor the church and build their faith, but when complete revelation was given these supernatural aids would be done away with.

But now then, after discovering that the church is the result of God's eternal purpose and that God had a plan or a pattern in building the church, that is, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, I want us to notice the divine program of work that God gave the church. This my brethren, is why we exist as a church tonight. This is the mission of the church and Paul goes right on down in the very verses that we were reading and tells us exactly why the church was established. Here it is, "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ."

First of all, we exist as a church *to perfect the saints*, or that is, for the edification of the saints. The word 'perfecting' literally means and properly signified, "to place the parts of any machine or body in their proper order and to unite them in such manner as to render the machine or body complete." (McKnight). In other words, when we perfect the saints, everyone in the body of Christ finds his niche, finds his place and goes, to work in order to perfect or to put together as a unit this great machine known as the church. Thus, the work of educating Christians in right living and acceptable service to God is the mission of the church. We exist to educate our people in the truth. We exist for the purpose of indoctrinating our young people and our older people in the principles of New Testament Christianity. We need only skip one generation to lose the church. We need only to fail in indoctrinating one generation and we lost the church and if we do not indoctrinate in the principles of New Testament Christianity we fail in our mission

as the church.

Secondly, *for the work of the ministry*. The word 'ministry', of course, has reference to ministers of serving; service is the basic idea and includes ministering to the poor, service rendered in behalf of anyone needing help, whether in a physical or spiritual matter. We exist as a church to aid and help those among our number who are in need. We minister to people in many ways; people who are sad, people who are sorrowful, people who are in need of physical aid, people who are in need of food or clothing, people who are in need of visiting in various ways, so that we can encourage and aid them in living the Christian life. We are a ministering body so to speak, and that is one of our reasons for existing.

And thirdly, we exist as a church, *unto the building up of the body of Christ*, that is, the preaching of the gospel. The same word translated 'edifying' here in our King James version, usually translated 'building' in most of the other versions, is from the same word Jesus used in Matt. 16:18, when he said, "Upon this rock I will build my church." It, apparently, is used by Paul in the sense of to plant or establish where the church was not known. Therefore, the mission of the church is the evangelization of the world, preaching the gospel in all the world and planting the cause of Christ in every city, every town, and in every village. This is the mission of the church, "... Go ... preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved..." (Luke 16:15, 16). We exist as a church to preach the gospel to all the world. We exist as a church to minister to those within our own number and to serve those in need. We exist as a church for a purpose of edification, perfecting, building up spiritually, education and indoctrinating members of the body of Christ in the principles of truth.

I want to give the remainder of my time tonight talking to you about what the mission of the church is not. I want to talk to you about why we do not exist as a church and you know, the sad thing is this, there are too many times we take the spiritual power available to the body of Christ and we prostitute that power and work ourselves to death in areas where the church has no business. We allow things to become our chief concern in our mission that were not the chief concern of the Lord and certainly not the mission of the church, as far as Paul was concerned.

Number one, we do not exist as a church *for social purposes*. Christianity is not a social religion, the gospel of Jesus Christ is not a social gospel. The church is not a social institution. Now, I readily admit that the gospel will work social reform but it does so only, get this, only be reforming the individual. Now, you take a man who needs to be reformed and you allow the gospel of Christ to reform that man and the result will be social reform but, get this, we don't go out tonight as a church for the purpose of reforming society. I don't care how bad we may believe the minorities are mistreated, we do not operate as a social institution in the field of social change, reform or welfare. That's the reason you don't see the church marching down a street with a bunch of placards and signs calling for equality, whatever kind it is.

Secondly, we do not exist as a church to provide and serve as a guide in recreational activities. I have no objection to recreational activities as long as they are clean and wholesome, for young people or for old people, but we do not exist as a church to provide that kind of entertainment for anybody. We are not in the world to provide a social hour or entertainment of any kind. I'm amazed sometimes to see some of my own brethren who believe the only thing included in the word 'fellowship' is getting together after church in the social room to have coffee and cookies with one another. That not only is a misunderstanding of what Bible fellowship is, but it is an indication we're trying to place the church on the level of an entertaining society or entertainment group and we are not that. Now, if young people want to get together after church services, before church services, anytime during the week and engage in good wholesome entertainment, that's fine but I want to tell you this, it's not the mission of the church to plan, to work for, to pay for, to provide or to supervise that kind of entertainment. That's not our mission, never has been and never will be. Jesus didn't establish the church for that reason. It does not stand tonight for that reason. And I'll tell you this, the reason that the foundation which supports the church appears to be crumbling from beneath it in many places is because the church has prostituted its efforts, its zeal, and the components that could make it what the Lord wants it to be into areas and efforts that do not bear divine sanction.

Thirdly, we do not exist as a church *to make money*. I couldn't say it any better than just to say the church has no business in business. We're not in business. We don't operate wineries like some religious organizations do. We don't buy large strips of land down town and rent it out as parking lots six days a week and use it ourselves on Sunday. We don't have bazaars, pie suppers, chili suppers, bingo games or any other kind of fund raising activities for the purpose of making money. Raising funds, merchandising, manufacturing, parties, games, bazaars, rummage sales, etc. are not a work of the church. We're not a money making organization. We're not in business financially. The only business we are in is in the business of the King, and it is our responsibility to see that that business is carried out.

Next, the church does not exist for the purpose of *providing secular education* to anybody. As much as everybody needs to learn to read and write and work some arithmetic; as much as everybody needs some kind of education today to live and get along, it is not the mission of the church to provide it. We don't exist for the purpose of building, if colleges, elementary schools, secondary schools, whatever you want to call them, the church is not in the education business. We're not an educational institution. And I tell you something else, some churches even so called Churches of Christ, that have gone into the education business have been confronted with more problems than, perhaps, they'll ever solve in a lifetime. And if you're a young person here tonight, if you're a parent here tonight and you have young children, don't ever deceive yourself into believing because you send your boy off to a so-called "Christian college" he'll come back with a fine education and not be tainted by evolution or some unscientific theory. He may come back untainted by some theory that is not scientific but he may bring with him a whole passel of digression. He may bring back a mind warped by innovations. He may bring back a mind that has been so enlarged and expanded to accept and to include things that are forbidden in the word of God and don't think for one minute they don't teach it in those institutions. That's one reason they exist. We don't exist as a church for that reason. The church is not in the education business.

And then last of all, the church does not exist for the purpose of *promoting, or engaging in political activities*. We're not a political institution. That is an obligation that belongs in the realm of civil government. It is the responsibility of the civil government to meet and to resolve such issues (Rom. 13:1-7). We're not a political society and for that reason no man who is a leader in the church, no man who is a Christian has a right to stand up, divine right anyway, and try to rally a large number of Christians around him to go out and vote in block style to get a certain piece of legislation through. That is the reason as a church we don't go out here as a political organization and march down the street in protests. We don't have any lot in political issues. We're not involved in politics. We've got a spiritual mission and while some people are running to and fro trying to put over a particular political slant the world dies and goes to pot.

Our mission is preaching the gospel so that the world can be saved. Our mission is perfecting the saints so that we can learn and fit ourselves together as a machine does and work with dignity and precision in bringing about God's purpose. Our mission is to minister and serve one another so that the church can function as God intended for it to.

I want to leave this one thought with you tonight. If you don't remember anything else I've said, please remember this when you go home. You remember that the great God of the universe, who created the sun, and the moon and the stars and all the planets couldn't show fullness of his' wisdom that way. The great God of Heaven, who created man from the dust of the earth and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a rational, intelligent, living soul, could not completely demonstrate his wisdom in that way, and thus it was his eternal purpose to give us a glimpse of his wisdom that had never been seen before and he did that when Jesus built the church.

We need to think seriously, brethren, about why we exist as a church. We need to be sure that everything we do, every undertaking is prompted by God's divine purpose and plan.