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The Purpose of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

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It is of immense help, in contemplating the manifold activities and energies of God, to be able to gather everything into one inclusive, comprehensive, and concrete issue. The Bible, from Genesis to the Revelation, covers a wide range and includes a vast amount of matter, but it has one all-governing and conclusive objective. The purpose of God is one, and only one. It is always referred to in the singular; "Called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). "According to the purpose...." (Eph. 1:11). "According to the eternal purpose" (Eph. 3:11). "According to His purpose and grace" (2 Tim. 1:9). It is not a variety or number of things; it is just one.

And what is the one, single, comprehensive purpose? The answer is Christ! "His Son, Jesus Christ." And when we ask further, What about His Son? The answer is, to have Him fill all things and to have all things in Him. That this is so is made clear in the definite statements of Scripture; "In Him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible... all things have been created through Him, and unto Him." "For it was the good pleasure of the Father that in Him should all the fullness dwell" (Col. 1:16,19). "Whom He appointed heir of all things, through Whom also He made the worlds (ages)" (Heb. 1:2).

So, then, in the counsels of God, all things must head up in Christ. God's occupation is with bringing Christ in, and bringing into Christ. If we would be "God's fellow-workers", this must be our single-eyed aim and business. This defines precisely the purpose of the Church.

The presence of the Church in this world is, firstly, to be a corporate expression of Christ here. The very designation "The Body of Christ" means Christ corporately present. The Church is not an institution, organization, society, or religious fraternity. It is, - in God's intention, the embodiment of His Son in a continuation of His life and work on this earth. In the next place, after the *being* of the Church, is its work. This is just one thing, and by the one result alone its work stands or falls. This work is to make for an increase of Christ in this world, and this is to be accomplished along two lines; namely, by *evangelism* and *building up*.

Evangelism is the bringing of Christ initially *into* lives. Every new instance of Christ coming into a life is an additional measure of Christ in the creation, making a new creation. It is of the utmost importance that there should be no stopping short at mere mental agreement, or emotional expression, or just an outward act of acceptance, but that Christ by His Spirit should really have taken up residence within. But our object is not to deal with evangelism, but to point out its object, which is *to bring in Christ and to bring into Christ*.

The other purpose of the Church is building up. In the most familiar versions of the New Testament the word in this connection is "edification". But "building up" is much better. The Church is to "build itself up". We are to "build one another up". Spiritual gifts and ministries are all meant for "building up". What is this "building up"? It is the increase of Christ. The New Testament repeatedly refers to "babes in Christ" and "full-grown men" in Christ; and there is a constant urge to "go on to full growth". Thus, by extensification and intensification, by increase outwardly and inwardly, it is Christ gaining an ever-increasing place. We repeat, by numerous ways and means God is governed by this one all-dominating objective - His Son.

But there is a point which needs very much to be emphasized and kept in view. These two things, evangelism and building up, are not two separate things; they must be kept together. If they are separated, or if either is given a greater place than the other an unbalanced condition will arise, and this will defeat God's full end. If evangelism is given a place greater than building up, or to the exclusion of the other, the result will be a great number of spiritual babes who remain such, no matter how long they live. There will then exist a preponderating number of Christians who are like those referred to by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews - "When by reason of the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need again that someone teach you the rudiments of the first principles... and are become such as have need of milk, and not of solid food" (Heb. 5:12). By this and what immediately follows, the Apostle makes it quite clear that God can never be satisfied with just having so many, however many, "converts", born-again babes, but His end demands that these shall come to the spiritual position where they can take all that He has to give of spiritual strong meat, and have spiritual senses exercised, being "experienced in the word" and of spiritual intelligence. All this means what Paul called "the measure of Christ", and the end in view - "unto the measure... of the *fullness* of Christ."

If, on the other hand, building up is given a place out of all proportion to evangelism, we shall have another malformation. There will arise an ultra-spirituality that is divorced from what is practical. Truth will, sooner or later, take the place of Life. The mental will rule out the truly spiritual. The worst outcome will be that those involved will be found to have got into a false position which will not stand up to the tests of real life, the expression of Christ, among the people and conditions of this world. For the real proof of spiritual life is in its ability to express Christ in love, forbearance, patience, meekness, and self-forgetfulness, in an unsympathetic, ununderstanding, and

unappreciative world. This does not mean that there should be a limiting of either evangelism or building up, but it does mean that there *must* be a close relationship between the two.

This is very strikingly manifested in the fact that the Apostles of the New Testament combined these two ministries in such fullness. They evangelized mightily; but what an immense building up ministry they fulfilled also! They brought Christ in almost everywhere they went, but they brought Him in in ever-increasing fullness wherever they *had* been. The point is the combination of the two. In the matter of ministry gifts to the Church, the Evangelist and the Pastor and Teacher are complementary ministries.

All this is surely very patent. But where are we now? We do not hesitate to say that the relationship between these two things has not by any means been preserved in equal proportions. The fact is that there is a preponderance of Christians who are, after many years, spiritual babes, sadly immature; without understanding in spiritual things; without capacity (and without appetite) for "strong meat". The result is that the impact and effect of Christ in this world is not at all commensurate with either the time that Christianity has been here, or the number of Christians on the earth. A few strong, healthy, and "experienced" people of God will count for a very great deal more than a vast number of Christians whose maturity is unduly delayed. There is therefore much to be done by way of removing this ill-balanced state and bringing the Lord's children to the state and position which should be theirs "by reason of the time".

This means that there is a real need and demand for a ministry of "the fullness of Christ" to the Christians of our time. The world's need is preeminently Christ in greater fullness, and this can only be in and by the Church, His chosen vehicle. But, we repeat, all such ministry must not stop with itself. It must result in stronger, richer, fuller evangelism. That is to say, the Christians must come through it to the position of having more of Christ to show and impart. This then is what is our sense of calling - "for the perfecting of the saints unto (that *they* may do) the work of ministering"; the word "perfecting" meaning making complete or full.

To sum up, God's end is the bringing in of His Son to fullness. This is the object and nature of the Church's being and work. The method is twofold: evangelism and building up. These two must be kept in close relationship as complementary, and the balance must be preserved in equality. This balance has *not* been preserved, and there are very many Christians whose spiritual maturity and capacity is very unduly delayed. There is therefore an altogether inadequate registration, impact, and effectiveness as to Christ, considering how long Christianity has been here and how many Christians there are. The need then is for a ministry by which *Christians* can be helped to the position that is God's desire and intention for them. Such a ministry must not end in people becoming interested in and taken up with teaching as something in itself, but rather in a richer and fuller representation of Christ to and among the peoples of this world. It is a misapprehension of truth if it results in less concern for the increase of Christ by the salvation of sinners and the mutual spiritual helpfulness of the saved. Truth should never turn us in on ourselves, but should make us conscious of being under a great debt to others.

Then we must realize that there are certain things which are basic to full spiritual development. One of these is the essential organic oneness of all who are "in Christ". No individual, or number of individuals, as such, can attain unto the full stature of Christ; that is only possible for "the whole Body". Any kind of division amongst Christians is a violation of Christ ("Is Christ divided?" - 1 Cor. 1:13), and that must be contrary to the Holy Spirit, by whose work alone can we attain unto full

growth. Therefore believers must abandon schismatic and divisive ground and occupy only the ground of **Christ**. In the beginning the Church was constituted by the acceptance of the absolute Lordship and Headship of Christ, and not just His Saviourhood. "We preach Christ Jesus as Lord." The Saviourhood was largely for *men's* good, but the Lordship was mainly for *His* place. This issue was the occasion of all the trouble.

This then is the ministry to which we feel the Lord has called us. Through deep and drastic ways He has formed it. We have not assumed it, and we can only give what He has given. We have sought much and always to be saved from mere theory, and we feel that in this the Lord has been faithful; but it has been costly.

And now, brethren, how can we gather up what we feel as our burden? Perhaps in no better way than in the Apostle's words: "Teaching every man, and admonishing every man, that we may present every man perfect (full grown) in Christ."