



THE CHURCH

God's Program for Ministry

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The Church: God's Program for Ministry

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Jesus said, “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it” (Matt. 16:18). With His death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ laid the foundation for the church that He has been building for the last two thousand years. Among believers, however, there is much confusion concerning the nature of the church and what its role should be in the world today. As Christians, we know of the wonders of God’s salvation in Christ and His infinite grace that saved us from an eternity in hell, yet we have not always been clear on how God is working out His plan of redemption in the world. As we will see, God’s instrument for ministry in this age is the church. That is why it is important that we have a proper understanding of the church and what its purpose in the world is today.

When Did the Church Begin?

To understand the nature of the church, it helps to know when the church began. Did the church exist in the Old Testament, or did it begin shortly after the earthly ministry of Christ? Some Bible teachers hold that the church existed in the Old Testament. Some say it began with Adam, others say it started with Abraham. Yet the New Testament is clear that the church is a New Testament concept and did not exist in the Old Testament.

There are two important reasons for believing that the church began after the earthly ministry of Christ. First, when Jesus said, “I will build My church” in Matthew 16:18, the church was clearly still

future. The future tense of “I will build” shows that at the time Jesus spoke these words the church had not yet begun. Second, the baptism of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 12:13), which is essential to the church’s existence, did not begin until Acts 2. It was not until Acts 2 that the Holy Spirit began His work of baptizing believers into the Body of Christ. In Acts 1:5 Jesus said, “for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” The apostles had ministered with Christ for more than three years and had seen dramatic results from their preaching and miracles, but they still had not been baptized with the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:8, Jesus told the disciples, “you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” This was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples. It was on this day that the church began.

Who Makes Up the Church?

Just what is the church? A variety of people may give different answers to this question. For instance, a person may drive past our building in Lincoln and say, “There is Indian Hills Community Church,” equating the church with a building. The church, however, is not a building of brick and wood. The church is made up of those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ. Our building is where Indian Hills Community Church meets, but it is not the church. Believers in Jesus Christ make up the church.

The New Testament teaches that on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) a new union of believers came into existence. Both Jews and Gentiles (all non-Jewish people) became united in the Body of Christ—the church. This union of Jews and Gentiles in one body did not exist in the Old Testament era. In the Old Testament, God primarily worked with the people of Israel. It was to the Jews that God gave the Mosaic Law and the covenants. It was to them He revealed Himself (see Romans 3:4). On the other hand, Gentiles were “separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). Now, though, with the death of Christ and the coming of the church, believing Gentiles, along with believing Jews, together make up the Body of Christ. With His death and resurrection Jesus Christ “made both groups into one” (Ephesians 2:14).

Many of us take this truth for granted today, but the fact that both Jews and Gentiles are now joined together in one body was not easily understood by the early Christians. In fact, many Jews in the early church resisted this idea. This can be seen in Acts 10 and 11 with the story of Peter and Cornelius. In Acts 10, Peter was sent by the Holy Spirit to a Gentile named Cornelius. As Peter preached the Gospel, the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles, and they were baptized in the Holy Spirit. That the Gentiles had truly received the Holy Spirit was evidenced by the fact that they were "speaking with tongues and exalting God" (Acts 10:46). This gave evidence that the Gentiles had truly been saved and had received the Holy Spirit. Later, when Peter was in Jerusalem, the Jewish believers rebuked him for going to the Gentiles: "those who were circumcised took issue with him, saying, 'You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them' " (Acts 11:2-3). This response of the Jewish believers at that point is significant because it shows that even as late as Acts 11, the Jewish Christians did not understand that God's plan for the church included Gentiles. What was Peter's response to their rebuke?

"And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them [the Gentiles], just as He did upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:15-18).

Peter verified that the Gentiles had received the same Holy Spirit as the Jews. If Peter, an apostle, had not been personally present when the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles, the Jews would not have accepted that the Spirit had, indeed, come upon the Gentiles. But that He had could not now be denied.

In the Church Age, then, Jews and Gentiles are joined in the church—the Body of Christ. As Ephesians 2:14 says, "For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall." With the baptism of the Spirit came the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer in John 17:21, "that they may all be one." All who believe in Jesus Christ, no matter what their ethnic

background, are part of the church.

The Church: Universal and Local

As we have seen, the church was born on the Day of Pentecost and includes all those, regardless of nationality, who have trusted in Christ alone for their salvation. Yet, in the New Testament, the church has two emphases. First, there is what we call the “universal” or “invisible” church, comprised of all true believers from the time of Acts 2 onward. It includes all those who are related to Christ by faith through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. All believers from around the world make up this universal aspect of the church. For example, the believer in China is linked to the believer in the United States in a universal, invisible way. The universal church is a spiritual entity and has no physical manifestation of its own. When the New Testament refers to the universal church, the emphasis is often on the relationship believers have to Christ, who is the head of the church (see Col.1:18).

Second, the New Testament also refers to what is called the “local church” or “local churches,” made up of people who are believers in Jesus Christ and who meet together in a local or specific place. Local churches are not only related spiritually to Christ but also have a physical and geographical identity. The seven churches John wrote to in Revelation 2 and 3 were local churches. He wrote to the churches at Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, and so on. These churches, though all related to each other in a common faith, were each distinct entities and were addressed as such. In the same way, churches today, comprised of true believers, are local churches. If one wants to know what the church of Jesus Christ is like they can visit a local body of believers. Whenever we attend a local church made up of individuals who have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, we are seeing the Body of Christ. There is no other place to go to see the church as it is presented in the New Testament. The only physical representation of the universal church is the local church.

The Local Church as the “Church of God”

Should local churches be hesitant to call themselves the “church of God” since each local church only makes up a small fraction of all believers in Christ? Acts 20:17-38 helps answer this question. This

section records Paul's message to the Ephesian elders from Miletus. Significant to our discussion is what Paul told them in verse 28: "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." Here Paul is speaking to the elders of the local church at Ephesus. Notice, though, that this church is called "the church of God." He does not say "they are part of the church of God" but they *are* "the church of God." The church of God, then, was manifested in that local body. Paul knew that many other churches existed, of course, but that did not change the fact that he called the church at Ephesus "the church of God." Likewise, the local church you belong to is "the church of God." Despite the fact that each local church consists of only a small fraction of all true believers, each local congregation can properly be called the "church of God."

The Parachurch Explosion

The church of Jesus Christ, as we have seen, has two dimensions—universal and local. However, though both notions are present, the emphasis in the New Testament is not equal. The Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, is used 114 times in the New Testament. Of the 114 times the word for church is used, more than 90 refer to the local church. Less than 25 references to "church" in the New Testament refer to the universal church. Statistics do not always prove everything, but this does give us an idea of where the New Testament places its emphasis when discussing the church—the local church.

Why is this important? One reason is that in Christianity today, the universal church, not the local church, has become the dominant emphasis. This can be seen with the recent development of parachurch ministries. Parachurch organizations are groups that carry out Christian ministries not rooted in a local church. Since the 1940s there has been an explosion of parachurch ministries. This trend is in line with what is known as Neo-evangelicalism. "Neo" means "new." New evangelicalism is a response against fundamentalism. Many felt that fundamentalism was too narrow-minded and small in focus. But with Neo-evangelicalism, the emphasis became tolerance and unity. E.J. Carnell, a professor at Fuller Seminary, wrote in the late 1940s and early 1950s against divisions among denomi-

nations. He said churches needed to overcome their denominational and doctrinal differences. This thinking has influenced the parachurch movement.

Before we look further, though, at the issue of parachurch groups, a few points of clarification are necessary. First, we will not be singling out any parachurch group in particular. Nor does what we say necessarily apply to every parachurch group or activity. Not every parachurch group has all of the flaws or difficulties that will be mentioned. Also, we are not saying the Bible forbids parachurch groups because it does not. What we will examine, though, is some of the problems inherent with parachurch ministries. Then we will look at God's plan for ministry as revealed in His Word and how Christians can be as biblical as possible in carrying out that plan.

One danger parachurch organizations must constantly face is the pressure to compromise doctrinally. With certain parachurch groups, some doctrines are purposely avoided to allow for unity between those of different beliefs within the group. I once had the opportunity to visit with a man who helped start a well-known parachurch organization. In our conversation we talked about the role doctrine played within his organization. Interestingly, he said he knew from the group's beginning that they could not be as narrow in their doctrine as a local church. I have also known people in parachurch ministries who were told certain doctrines must not be discussed. They were told not to bring in certain beliefs their church may hold because those views might be divisive. When it came to doctrine, then, they sought the lowest common denominator of doctrine.

As Christians, though, we only have to be as narrow as the Bible and as broad as the Bible. We do not have to sort through the Bible and say, "Take out page 292. Take out page 315 because it might be divisive and is not really that important to the ministry." The whole truth lies in the entire Bible. That does not mean we perfectly understand the Bible; but we are to be committed to the Bible in its entirety. Parachurch organizations, by their nature, must be more inclusive and encompassing, looking for the least doctrinal commitment that will be involved or required. It is here that danger lurks. God has called the church to be the "pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). The church is to be committed to *all* biblical truth. The apostle Paul said, "For I did not shrink from declaring to

you the whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:27). Since all of the Word of God is inspired, we do not have the right to decide which doctrines are important and which ones are not. We cannot decide which parts of God's revelation are significant and which need not be emphasized.

The structure of leadership used in parachurch organizations deserves closer evaluation. According to the New Testament pattern, the local church is to be governed by elders (see 1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-5; Acts 20:17-35). These godly men have the responsibility of leading the church. They are responsible for the major decisions and the maintaining of doctrinal purity. Because of this great responsibility, there are very high standards for being an elder (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). In some parachurch groups, though, the leadership does not function according to the New Testament pattern. They do not operate according to the standards and guidelines required of the local church. As a result, the leaders of these groups are often not held accountable in the same way that elders in the local church are to be held accountable.

Another concern with parachurch ministries is that they often draw away resources from the local church. The people, time, effort, and money that could be given to the local church, which is God's plan for ministry, are often poured into parachurch ministries. These parachurch groups are often able to attract and limit themselves to some of the most talented and committed Christian leaders available. As a result, local churches are weakened by the loss of talents and resources.

I once received some Bible study material from a fast-growing parachurch organization. The information was specific on what material would be covered and what days of the week a person could attend Bible study and fellowship groups. When I read this, I wondered, "Where is the local church?" These things are primarily the responsibility of the church. Yet, if one got involved with this program not much time would be left for the local church other than maybe attending on Sunday.

Most parachurch groups have good intentions. I do not doubt the godliness and sincerity of those involved in these groups. They want to see people saved and believers grow in their Christian walks. However, we must take a step back and see if we are carrying out

God's work in the way He has prescribed or if we are substituting His plan with our own. God's work must be done God's way. Those who raise the issue of defining God's way for carrying out the ministry are often accused of being against evangelism. In a certain sense, evangelism has become the end, and the means to that end do not matter. There is the idea that we must reach the world; therefore, we cannot be divided over doctrinal issues. While this sounds good, it is not biblical. We must have a passion to reach the lost people of this world, but we must do it with the desire and passion to be biblically correct. The church is to be "the pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15), not the arbitrator of what truth is important and what truth is less important.

Though the Bible does not forbid parachurch organizations, the New Testament reveals that God's plan for ministry in this age centers in the local church. Strongly believing this, though, often opens one up to being characterized as anti-parachurch. For example, at Indian Hills, our strong emphasis on local church ministry has led to criticism that we are against parachurch ministries. We, however, do not consider ourselves anti-parachurch. What we try to be is *pro-local church*. We are passionately committed to God's program as revealed in His Word. The local church is what consumes us and absorbs our time. Some Christians are enthusiastic and passionate, giving their money and time to outside Christian organizations, but share little of that enthusiasm and passion with their local church. The most some Christians do with their local church is show up on Sunday mornings. But why should that be the case? Why can't the devotion given to parachurch groups be poured into the church, which is God's plan? Granted, some churches have many problems, but so did the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3. Serving in some of those places would have been hard, too. While the work of other organizations may seem more exciting, the church is still God's plan. Can we say, "Lord, we know the local church is your plan but we have something else that will work better?" I have yet to meet a person who can be passionately and completely committed to two spiritual ministries. Some may be involved with two ministries, but one will consume their life and one will not. Too often the passion is for the parachurch activity, not the local church.

We need to understand what God's plan in the world is. That plan is the local church. It should not be our desire to be character-

ized as anti-parachurch. Our goal, hopefully, is that we be known as pro-local church. As a pastor, I want people to know that we are passionately committed to the ministry God has given us in this city. When I talk with people in parachurch ministries, I notice how they are consumed with their ministries and how they think everyone else should be as well. But if we feel that way about our local church we are often seen as narrow. The question we must ask is, "If they can be passionate about their ministries, why can't we be excited about our ministry as a church?" Churches are often called on to raise money to support the vision of parachurch groups, yet how often do parachurch organizations offer to support the local church? These groups claim they are reaching the world, but so is the church.

Do Churches Need to Get Together?

The dangers of overemphasizing the universal church do not stop with parachurch groups. Another danger exists with the current pressure for churches to unify regardless of doctrine. I have heard people say, "If only churches would lay aside their doctrines and come together, think how we could reach the world for Jesus." Some even believe that lack of unity among churches has actually held back the Gospel and has cut down on the number of people who would otherwise have come to Christ. Certainly, there is an element of truth to the fact that Bible-believing churches should be supportive of each another. In the New Testament, individuals from one church were often sent to another church. Also, there were times when churches helped meet the physical needs of another. Yet nowhere in the New Testament are churches told to unify. Though we find some interaction between churches in the New Testament, they are not told to "get together" or become unified under one centralized authority. Each church was to fulfill the commission God had given them in their particular area. Christ had much to say to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2 and 3, but they were not commanded to unify or assert their influence or authority over the other churches. Instead, Jesus addressed each local church as an individual entity and told them what they must do. Thus, God's plan to carry out the ministry of Christ in the world today is through the local churches He has established.

How Christians Are to Function

Now we turn our attention to how Christians within the local church are supposed to function. We have shown that the church is God's plan for ministry. Now we will look at how individuals, who make up the church, are supposed to operate. To do this we will look at Paul's instructions to the Corinthians. As we will see, ministry takes place when those who make up the church use the spiritual gifts God has given them.

In 1 Corinthians 12:1 Paul states, "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware." Paul's topic is the use of spiritual gifts in the context of the local church. He goes on to say,

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

Paul's point is that there is both diversity and unity in the body of Christ. This diversity can be seen in that there are "varieties of gifts" (v.4), "varieties of ministries" (v.5), and "varieties of effects" (v.6). Different people within the church have different gifts that are manifested in various ways. These gifts can be used in a wide variety of ways. Some have the gift of helps, some have the gift of exhortation, some have the gift of teaching, and so on. The Body of Christ is diverse, yet the church also has unity because it has the "same Spirit" (v.4), "same Lord" (v.5), and "same God" (v.6) who permeates it all and keeps it together.

Later in 1 Corinthians 12:14-18, Paul will use the example of a physical body to illustrate the diversity and unity within the local church. We know that a person has one body and that within the one body are many parts—feet, hands, ears, eyes, nose and many others. But these parts do not operate independently. They are under the control of one mind. The same is true with Christ's spiritual body—the church. Within the Body of Christ there are not only "varieties of gifts" but verse five also says there are "varieties of ministries." Within the church there are many ways to serve the Lord, but there is still only one "Lord." Every person is to use his or her spiritual gift for serving Him. That is how God is carrying out His work in the world today. He does it through His people that He has

brought together as His church. They do His work in serving Him by exercising the gifts that He has given them to do. It is a simple plan.

Gifts Given to "Each One"

Next, Paul states, "But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7). The emphasis in this verse is on "each one." Put simply, every believer is given a spiritual gift by God. No one is left out. I have known Christians who say, "I don't have a spiritual gift." But that is not what verse seven says. It is a denial of Scripture for any believer to claim that God has not enabled him or her to contribute to His body.

Another excuse sometimes given for not serving is that the church a person attends is too big or that they are not needed. Yet that is not true. God brings every part of His body together for a purpose. If God has placed a believer in a local church, He has a part for that believer to play which will enable the body to function more effectively.

Gifts—An Evidence of God's Presence

Notice also that Paul in verse seven refers to the "manifestation of the Spirit." Whenever a believer uses his spiritual gift, the Holy Spirit's presence in his life is made manifest. We may not physically see the Holy Spirit, but we do notice His presence when a person uses his or her spiritual gift. Unfortunately, some people attend church for a long time without ever getting involved and ever exercising a spiritual gift. Some leave churches complaining that they do not fit in. Perhaps some who have this attitude are not truly born again. That may sound strong, but the ability to function as a vital part of the Body of Christ is a result of the Holy Spirit's work in a person's life. When a person does not contribute to the ministry we are not able to see the Holy Spirit working in his life. But when someone is submissive to the Spirit, we can see the power of God in his life.

Spiritual Gifts or Natural Talents?

Spiritual gifts are given by God for the work of ministry. A believer receives his or her spiritual gift(s) when he or she believes in Christ and is placed by the Holy Spirit into the church. But is

there any connection between the natural talents a person has as an unbeliever and the spiritual gifts he has as a believer? The answer is not always clear. God, in His sovereignty, can bestow on an unsaved person natural talents that can be used effectively for service after that person becomes a believer. But it is not correct to say that natural abilities and spiritual gifts are the same. A person may be a teacher in a school but that does not mean he has the gift of teaching. A talented but unbelieving musician can perform music in a church, but that person would not be able to build up the church through his music like a believer could. We all have natural abilities, but when a person becomes saved and is placed into the church, he is then gifted by God to be able to serve the body. Natural abilities, then, are different from spiritual gifts.

Spiritual Gifts for the Common Good

Who are spiritual gifts for? Notice that the manifestation of the Spirit, through the use of spiritual gifts, is “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12: 7). It is very important to realize that the purpose of spiritual gifts is for the benefit of the body. Spiritual gifts are not for self-edification but for others. If Christians understood this basic purpose of spiritual gifts much of the confusion today concerning the gift of tongues would be cleared up. Many in the charismatic movement believe that the gift of tongues is a private prayer language used for personal edification. Yet, Scripture makes clear that no gifts are given for personal benefit. They are given “for the common good.” On occasion, as part of my preparation, I will preach aloud to myself in my study. But as I teach alone in my study, I am not exercising my spiritual gift because my gift is not meant to be used on me or for my own good. Using a spiritual gift for oneself is not a valid use of the gift. My gift was not given for me. It was given to serve those in the body. Thus, all the gifts that God gives us are to be used for the common good of the church.

The Distribution of Spiritual Gifts

How do Christians receive their spiritual gifts? 1 Corinthians 12:11 states, “But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.” God is sovereign in the distribution of spiritual gifts. People do not receive these gifts because they prayed more or were more faithful than someone

else. They received them because God sovereignly bestowed them with that gift. That is why it is a “grace gift.” God decides which gifts believers will have and where they will fit in His body. Some people may not like where they have been placed in the body and complain about it. But what if our toes told us they did not like the role they played in our body? Would we cut them off and stick them to the side of our head and pretend they are an ear? Of course that is foolish. Toes were born in the body as toes. Talk to someone who has lost a toe and they will tell you how difficult walking without a toe really is. Toes may not get much glory, but like any other body part they are very important. Without them the body does not function as it should. This is what Paul meant when he said:

For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired (1 Cor. 12:14-18).

The body is not made up of just one part. An eye does not make a body. An ear does not make a body. A body properly functions when all the parts work together. The same is true with the Body of Christ. Christ's body—the church, functions best when all its members are functioning within the gifts God has given them. That is when true ministry takes place. One of the problems with the church at Corinth was that some people did not like their gifts. They wanted more prominent gifts. In the same way, some Christians today do not like their gifts. But we must understand the sovereignty of God at work in our salvation from beginning to end. He has sovereignly determined where each believer will fit into the body. Every part is absolutely essential.

Finding Your Spiritual Gift

Believers are to be active parts of Christ's body and that involves using their spiritual gifts. But what if you do not know what your spiritual gift is? How do you find out? The answer is to start looking for opportunities to serve. Look for areas in the church that

need help and do something about it. Perhaps the church needs up-keep in a certain area. Get involved with that. Maybe more help is needed in the nursery. Get involved there. Maybe the children's ministry needs help. Perhaps people are needed for visitation or evangelism. Perhaps that is where the Lord would have you serve. What interests do you have? Maybe there is an area suited to your interests where you can help out. The point is to start doing something. Find something you can do. You can be involved in a variety of things. Perhaps it will become clear where you can be especially effective in service. You may not find where you are gifted right away but eventually you will find where you are gifted to serve. You can do the work of an evangelist without being an evangelist. You can show mercy even if you do not have the gift of mercy. Give even if giving is not your gift. As you begin serving you will become more focused on developing the ministry and less concerned with what is wrong with it. You can help to make things right. You will find that there are areas where you will be more effective than others. This will become clear as you serve. Others will see your effectiveness and affirm where you are gifted.

Every believer fits into the body of Christ. As a pastor of a church I have a very visible role, but I realize that I am just *part* of the Body. People sometimes ask me what will happen to Indian Hills Community Church when I am gone. The answer is that the ministry will continue. Whenever I come back from vacation, I am in awe of how the ministry keeps growing. At Indian Hills we have many people serving faithfully whose ministries are not always visible to everyone. Yet their sacrificial and faithful ministries enable the body to carry out the ministry. Ephesians 4:16 states that "the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." As the parts of the body function and work together, the whole body is built up. That is God's plan.

Conclusion

God's plan is simple. As people are saved in this age, they become part of Christ's body—the church. The church has organization, structure and leaders. It carries out the ministry God has given it. Responsibility is placed upon the church leaders to be doctrinally

pure and functioning as they should. We are to carry out the ministry by being a part of His church. That is where our passion should be. All our gifts, abilities, energy and money ought to be committed to it. Organizations may come to us for time and money, but our first priority is to the area God has given us as a church. They may have great plans but we are to be passionately involved with the Body of Christ as the New Testament presents it.

Is the church the most important thing in your life? Let's not wait for others to come and lay out a vision of how we can get the job done. God has already done that. We cannot start our own plan and expect God to bless it. He already has His plan working, and He privileges us to be a part of it. Let us make sure we are doing His work according to His way.

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