God’s vision for His church is greater than you ever thought possible

Kim Allan Johnson
Contents

Introduction 8
Chapter 1 Phase Three 11
Chapter 2 Inheritors of the Dream 22
Chapter 3 Trinity Life 37
Chapter 4 Creativity 51
Chapter 5 Transcendence 65
Chapter 6 Incarnation 79
Chapter 7 Community 93
Chapter 8 Oneness 107
Chapter 9 Diversity 122
Chapter 10 The Purpose of Our Doctrines 136
Chapter 11 Doctrines and Everyday Life 149
Chapter 12 The Power of Love 162
Early Sabbath morning, I peered out our kitchen window at the raging snowstorm that blanketed central Massachusetts. Suddenly the phone rang. “Hey, Kim,” the head elder commented resignedly, “looks like we’ll have to cancel church today.”

I took the opportunity to expand his thinking and replied gently, “Actually, it’s not possible to cancel church. We may not meet in the building with the pews in it at 337 Main Street, but we can’t cancel because church is not a building or a worship service. It’s people.” Biblically speaking, we don’t go to church, we are church every day.

The word church has suffered from similar distortions and misunderstandings for centuries. As a result, congregations struggle and members do not receive the help and encouragement they so desperately need.

The Scriptures use many different analogies to describe church, including army, temple, flock, living stones, body, and family. Each increases our understanding and helps fill in the mental picture. If the Bible was written today, it would most likely add to that list the word team.
A Christian editor recently commented, “When we do church as a team, we fulfill the Lord’s desire that His Church work together—and we achieve amazing results for His kingdom.”

Connecting church with the word team resonates because it is a word people can relate to from their life experience. There are not only athletic teams but also teams of doctors, engineers, climbers, researchers, rescuers, builders, and others.

The word team conveys almost universal images of togetherness, mutual support, and the blending of talents and abilities to become something together that is much greater than any of us could be alone. Jesus modeled team building in a stunning way by taking a motley, self-centered band of twelve men and shaping them into a force that literally changed the world. He took the concept of team to extraordinary heights and defined it in jaw-dropping ways.

We are now called to continue His work and live out His thrilling dream in our own day, a dream that the Godhead has had for the church since the days of Old Testament Israel. Scripture makes it abundantly clear that our success as individual Christians depends on our understanding and experiencing church as God intended it to be. The success of God’s loving ministry in a world plagued by hopelessness and strife depends on our being church together according to His plan.

This book, The Team, will take you on a remarkable journey that explores God’s special calling for the Seventh-day Adventist Church and reveals how that high calling can revolutionize each of our lives today.

Kim Allan Johnson

---

Chapter 1

Phase Three

It seemed like a clever idea at the time. My wife Ann was “great with child,” our first. In mere days we would be parents! I knew that shortly after the contractions started she would phone her doctor to see if it was time to hightail it to the hospital. I thought, *Hey, why not capture that special moment for posterity?* Without telling her, I placed a tape recorder on the desk near the phone, inserted a fresh tape, and waited.

Sure enough, late one Friday afternoon the contractions began. They came sporadically at first and then grew in intensity and frequency. I faithfully wrote each one down in a little blue spiral-bound notebook, just as I had been taught in birthing class. Finally, I heard Ann say the magic words, “I’ve got to call the doctor.”

As she waddled slowly and awkwardly toward the den, I followed close behind, sporting a huge smirk. I was about to capture one of those motherly moments you read about in *Ladies’ Home Journal* or *Woman’s Day* magazines. As Ann dialed, I quietly stepped up to the other end of the desk, extended a nervous index finger, and hit “record.”
If I played back the recording today, you’d hear my wife saying something like, “What on earth are you doing over there? Are you recording this? This is no time to be fooling around with that ridiculous thing.” So much for motherly moments. She was a little tense, but she was also right. There were much more important matters to attend to.

Within an hour and a half, I was sitting by her bedside in the maternity ward garbed in a faded blue expectant-daddy getup, including monk cap and booties. I had three major responsibilities: hold her hand, feed her ice chips, and warn of upcoming contractions by monitoring a machine with a green screen that was wired to her bulging belly.

As the night wore on, Ann scrunched my left hand in a numbing death grip. The nurse kept the ice bucket replenished. I watched the monitoring machine with the intensity of a dog eyeing a backyard barbecue. “Oh, oh, a contraction’s coming,” I told her nervously. I could see the thin blue line on the monitor rise up to a rounded peak and then slowly subside. The higher the peak, the worse the pain.

“O-o-o-o,” I continued minutes later, “this one looks like a whopper. We’re talking serious pain here! Get a grip on those bedrails, baby! You’re in for a real teeth-grinder!” I was trying to be helpful.

After long hours of torment, my wife was finally wheeled into the delivery room.

And there, about 4:00 a.m., our little daughter was born. She weighed twenty-two pounds and was nine inches long. (Or was it nine pounds and twenty-two inches? I can never keep that straight.)

Today the Seventh-day Adventist Church is also experiencing a birth of sorts. Our ecclesiastical ankles are swollen. Our denominational back is aching. New life is coming. We are on the front edge of a new thing that the Holy Spirit is earnestly attempting to do in our midst. I call this new life “Phase 3.”

Phase 1

Since joining the church in 1968, I have experienced three separate and distinct phases of Adventism. I had no Adventist upbringing and
became a church member during Phase 1 after transferring from engineering school to a little Adventist college in rural New England. I chose to major in theology. Those were the waning days of legalism, when we heard a lot about prophecy and doctrine but very little about Jesus. I will be eternally grateful for the Bible studies people gave me that resulted in my baptism, but I now realize that they were long on beasts and short on the Savior. I knew numbers and timelines and heads and horns and met- als and nightmarish end-time scenarios. But the picture was incomplete. I fell in love with truth rather than with Christ, who is the Truth.

Legalism produces bucketloads of guilt, which can be a powerful motivator, and back then I felt guilty about pretty much everything in my life. I tried very hard to make myself acceptable to God. All during Phase 1 I poured myself into things religious with that uniquely frenetic energy characteristic of those who depend on their works to be saved.

I majored in extracurricular activities in college, trying every way I knew to spread truth. I became part of a mediocre folk group that traveled all over New England singing and preaching. I was the bulky-haired, guitar-strumming, intense-looking guy in the back. I cringe now when I think of all the guilt my sermons inadvertently dumped on the faithful.

I was eventually appointed the official outreach coordinator for the whole college, which provided untold opportunities for proving my spiritual worthiness to God. Within weeks I launched a massive plan to share Bible truth with all of Boston and any other nearby city that might be interested.

In order to raise much-needed cash for the cause, I stumbled into a fund-raising fiasco. An overzealous salesman phoned me one day in the dorm and described an incredibly simple way to fill our bare coffers. All I had to do was get fifty students to sell an eclectic variety of doodads and baubles door to door in the community. After overhead, we could keep 50 percent! The numbers were truly impressive. Just one case of the stuff could net us twenty-five dollars. With visions of big bucks for the witnessing budget, I must have ordered at least a hundred cases. Confident of off-the-charts success, I promised that the person who
sold the most would get a brand-new, one-hundred-dollar, easy-touch Royal typewriter.

We off-loaded the goods from the delivery van and stored them in an unused building on campus. On the big day only a dozen students showed up. Undaunted, I gave a rousing speech about lost people, hell, and the glories of the Promised Land. The students fanned out all over town toting multicolored feather dusters, multicolored key rings attached to what looked like oversized plastic marbles, multicolored notepads, multicolored pencils, etc.

At the end of the campaign we had ninety-seven cases left, and I was in big trouble. I pleaded with the company like a druggie before a judge, and they graciously let me truck the leftovers back to headquarters without penalty.

During the ensuing months, I slipped more fully into the insecure spiritual role of those who are high on commitment but short on spiritual assurance and inner peace. At some point I found an inch-thick, yellow-jacketed book ominously entitled *Sin*. I read it with the earnestness of a pathologist studying life-sapping diseases. The book opened up vast new possibilities for self-righteousness to flourish and expand. By the time I turned the last page, avoiding sin had become a near obsession. (My roommate would probably have left off the word *near*.)

I started dressing in the most subdued colors I could find from my limited wardrobe. Who knew if a particular color might be too flashy or ostentatious? The book had a whole chapter on that particular type of violation. I was fully prepared to wear black socks, black shoes, black pants, black shirts, and black underwear every day, if that’s what it took to be holy.

The union conference decided to send a bunch of us students to Bermuda to revive the youth. It was more of a vacation than a mission. We met briefly in the morning for a devotional and then hopped on our mopeds to tour the island. In the evening we simply had to show up at a rally.

Sadly, on the flight home, the other students got into a prolonged,
rather shocking period of silliness. They laughed uproariously at every little thing. It was the kind of laughter you experience around 2:00 a.m. when you’re pulling an all-nighter before a big exam. It was like a mass case of the hiccups. They guffawed for hours.

As I sat in my window seat staring out at the puffy cumulous-cloud formations, I recalled another helpful section of the book on sin that zeroed in on that kind of abject frivolity. My heart filled with utter disdain. Look at them, I thought. And they call themselves Christians? By the time I arrived back at the dorm, I had determined to never laugh again. Who knew at what juncture it might spill over into evil? Why take the chance with so much at stake? To paraphrase a famous quote, constant vigilance was the price of holiness. Spiritual life became an onerous burden.

Phase 2

Eventually I was delivered from legalism by discovering the wonders of grace and righteousness by faith during Phase 2. Around 1970 revival leaped from campus to campus across the U.S. As part of that resurgence, someone gave me a copy of the remarkable little book *Steps to Christ* that taught me, for the first time, how to trust in Christ completely for forgiveness, acceptance, and spiritual growth. I read mind-boggling sentences such as, “You cannot atone for your past sins; you cannot change your heart and make yourself holy. But God promises to do all this for you through Christ. . . . If you believe the promise,—believe that you are forgiven and cleansed,—God supplies the fact; you are made whole.”

The author went on to say, “Through this simple act of believing God, the Holy Spirit has begotten a new life in your heart. You are as a child born into the family of God, and He loves you as He loves His Son.”

The thrill of hearing those words is at the top of my life experiences. I was so excited that I even contemplated buying a plaid suit. The words of Scripture jumped off the pages with new meaning: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23, 24,
THE TEAM

NKJV). And “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8, 9, NKJV).

Several other theology majors and I kept a small version of Steps to Christ in our back pockets and read to other students from its grace-filled pages. Some English majors labeled us “resident holies,” but we were undeterred. We gave them over to the devil and kept on quoting.

Those were heady times. Soon I was caught up once again in grand schemes to reach the lost. But this time I was experiencing righteousness by faith in my own heart. I had a Christ-centered message of hope and tapped into a far more healthy motivation.

Unfortunately, the transition from Phase 1 to Phase 2 was not without considerable denominational pain, misunderstanding, and finger-pointing throughout North America. For a time, Adventists across the country were polarized. Each side hurled charges and countercharges. Leaders called special councils and committee meetings to sort out entrenched conflict. The Holy Spirit had to work overtime to move churches forward into grace, inch by precious inch.

But thirty years later, grace-oriented sermons have now become the norm, and books about righteousness by faith fill the shelves of every Adventist Book Center. Except among some battle-hardened holdouts, Phase 2 has been widely accepted.

Phase 3

We are now on the brink of what I believe is Phase 3. In Phase 2 we learned how to have a successful Christian experience individually. In Phase 3 the Holy Spirit is earnestly trying to teach us how to be successful Christians together. Phase 3 is all about discovering how to be church.

It is certainly an incredible miracle for individuals to turn from sin and give their hearts to Christ. But it is an equally incredible miracle for them to join hearts and minds to become the body of Christ. Taking church members from disparate backgrounds and cultures, with a wide
variety of personalities, hang-ups, and biases, and bringing them together into true unity, interdependence, and mutual love, is the relentless focus of the Godhead in our day. They are now engaged in prodding, urging, and wooing us all into being church in new and unprecedented ways.

So many of our churches in North America are languishing and struggling with stagnant growth and little vitality, and I have often wondered why. I now believe that in many cases it is because they have no clue how to be church in the biblical sense. We put a bunch of baptized people in a building with pews and a pulpit and tell them to be a church without explaining how. Is it any wonder they flounder so?

In my seminar called “Church Alive,” about God’s vision for the church, we take part in a group exercise I call the blind circle. I ask volunteers to come forward, stand in a circle, and join hands. (They have to be in multiples of four, such as eight or twelve). I tell each group that they can talk but they have to close their eyes and keep them shut on penalty of death. I explain that the object is to form a square. It is hilarious to watch as they try to agree on how it should be done. When they feel they have made a decent square, I have them open their eyes. Usually, through trial and error, they do remarkably well.

I then ask what they think was the key to success. The most frequent answers are cooperation, listening, and leadership. As important as those are, there is a factor that is more fundamental and more important than any of those. The vital key is that everyone understood what I meant when I said “square.” Everyone could picture that clearly in their minds because they had been taught since childhood exactly what a square looked like—four straight lines the same length put together at ninety-degree angles. The point is that you cannot make what you do not know. If I had asked them to make a Deedilyfump, they couldn’t do it. They’d flounder all night and be no closer to the solution than when they started because no one knows what a Deedilyfump is, not even me. Likewise, we cannot expect our members to “be church” when they have so many different ideas of what church is all about.
How we do church is usually based on what previous generations have done or the pooling of our own subjective opinions. Most planning assumes that we know the answer to the crucial question, “What is church?” Sadly we press ahead with budgets and committee meetings and programming and all sorts of activities without ever seriously addressing that vital question.

Stephen Covey, in his best-selling book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, tells the story of an imaginary group of people on safari cutting their way through the jungle with machetes. They hack and sweat and slog along day after day through thick underbrush and vines.

One day someone decides to climb up the tallest tree in the area. The person looks around and yells down, “Wrong jungle!”

Covey concludes, “As individuals, groups, and businesses, we’re often so busy cutting through the undergrowth we don’t even realize we’re in the wrong jungle. . . . Effectiveness . . . does not depend solely on how much effort we expend, but on whether or not the effort we expend is in the right jungle.”

Remarkably, even though we think of ourselves as “people of the Bible,” several key doctrines in Scripture often are either ignored or followed to a very limited degree: (1) the priesthood of all believers; (2) the biblical role of the pastor; (3) becoming the body of Christ; (4) spiritual gifts; (5) building a sense of community among the members; and (6) incarnational evangelism, among other examples. These truths are just as important as the Sabbath and the Second Coming. Whenever they are not valued, the congregations suffer. All of these biblical teachings come under the heading of “ecclesiology,” the biblical doctrine of how to be church.

Do your congregation and local leadership make understanding the Godhead’s vision for the church top priority? Does the Trinity’s grand expansive plan grip their hearts and imaginations so powerfully that sometimes they can’t sleep at night? When the church leaders meet, do they spend most of their time strategizing how Heaven’s plan can become a reality in their congregation and community?
Or does the church board spend their time discussing whether to buy a new lawnmower, whether to raise the janitor’s salary by fifty cents an hour, or what color to paint the Junior room? Are the leaders’ priorities in line with God’s, or are they majoring in minors? What story does the agenda tell?

“Processionary caterpillars” are very interesting little critters. They move through the trees in long processions, each one with its eyes half closed and its head snugly fitted up against the rear of its predecessor.

Jean-Henri Fabre, the great French naturalist, after patiently experimenting with a group of these caterpillars, finally enticed them to the rim of a large flowerpot where he succeeded in getting the first one connected with the last one, thus forming a complete circle that started moving around in a procession that had neither a beginning nor an end.

The naturalist expected that after a while the caterpillars would catch on to the joke—get tired of their useless march and start off in some new direction.

But not so.

Through sheer force of habit, the living, creeping circle kept moving around the rim of the pot—around and around, keeping the same relentless pace for seven days and seven nights—and doubtless would have continued longer had it not been for sheer exhaustion and ultimate starvation.

An ample supply of food was close at hand, and plainly visible, but it was outside the range of the circle so the caterpillars continued along the beaten path. They were following instinct, habit, custom, tradition, precedent, past experience, standard practice, or whatever you may choose to call it, but they were following blindly.

… They meant well—but they got nowhere.\(^4\)

In a similar manner, Adventist congregations today may blindly follow
the past, assuming that the way we have done church up until now is the way it is supposed to be. As a result, they find themselves on a treadmill of tradition that falls far short of what the Godhead originally had in mind.

A startling prophecy in the book of Revelation indicates that in the last days a people would arise who have excellent doctrines and lots of truth, and yet, they would attempt to be church according to their own thinking. The results would be so off the mark, so disastrously out of whack, that it would make God nauseous. “‘And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, ‘‘I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. . . . So then, because you are . . . neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth’”’ (Revelation 3:14–16, NKJV).

These verses are not targeting individual Christians. The focus is squarely on our approach to being church as congregations, not just Sabbath morning but every day of the week. The issue is not primarily worship or programming but relationships.

A church may be full of dedicated, sincere, active Christians and yet fit the Laodicean description because they are trying to be church according to their own plans, their own methods, and their own ideas and values. And God is saying, “Not even close.” The mental image of God holding His hand over His mouth as He stifles the urge to barf is pretty graphic, to say the least. This is not a pleasant picture.

Yet, God is not reacting that way out of anger. He loves us so fully, so immensely, that His great heart is pained by either our neglect or our rejection of His plan. It is the reaction of a farmer who has provided people with enough land and seeds to feed thousands of starving children, and yet they fail to water or fertilize and are content with a relatively meager harvest. It is the reaction of an architect who provided people with all the blueprints and resources to build a magnificent structure for shade and protection from the cold, and yet they insist on erecting a tent. It is deep disappointment and sadness that forces God to reach for the Maalox.

I have to confess that it is extremely disconcerting to me, as a convert to Adventism, that we so readily agree that the Laodicean prophecy applies to the Adventist Church and yet seem to do so very little about it.
“Yup, that’s us, all right. The way we do church makes God wanna puke.” Yet in the thirty years I’ve been a member, I can’t think of any major changes in the fundamental direction of the church in North America. Even though God is yelling down at us, “Wrong jungle!” we continue hacking and cutting in the same basic path.

However, the Holy Spirit is starting to change that alarming, frustrating scenario. He is moving upon hearts and minds throughout Adventism. He is working the same way He did to transition us from legalism to righteousness by faith. There will once again be misunderstandings and finger-pointing. Charges and countercharges will be flung at each other. Power struggles will erupt.

But new life is inexorably being born. It starts with a deep longing in the heart. I see it when I speak to various groups throughout the country. After I talk about God’s vision for His church, pastors here and there will come up to me privately and say, “I am so anxious to see the vision you are talking about become a reality, but my conference is still stuck in the old paradigm. What can I do?” Someday, somehow, someway, through courageous, submissive cooperation with the Holy Spirit, that is going to change. I just hope I’m not in a nursing home by the time it does.

Each of us longs for significance. We live day after day, doing the best we can, hoping that our lives will, in the end, count for something good. We wonder if, in spite of our failures and weaknesses, we are making a difference in the lives of others. I know of no greater way to develop a sense of significance amidst our daily routine than to partner with the Godhead in the fulfillment of Their amazing vision for the church. There is no more exalted purpose, no higher privilege, than to know you have a part to play each day in the fulfillment of the Godhead’s dream.

---

2 Ibid., p. 52.