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# The motivation factor: Why people do what they do

Skip Bell, *Andrews University*



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**Skip Bell, DMin**, is professor of Christian leadership and director of the Doctor of Ministry program, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, United States.



# The **motivation** factor: Why people do what they do

**P**eople in thriving churches have it. Organizations that change the world have it. Productive people apparently have it. An effective spirit-filled ministry team certainly needs it.

What is this “it”?

Motivation.

Church leaders often view motivation as a mysterious phenomenon. True, our observations regarding motivation create as many questions as answers. The disciplines of psychology and organizational theory propose premises often leading in opposite directions. On the one hand, some people believe motivation is a part of the natural realm—one is born with the trait. On the other, some see motivation as a mystical quality. While helping and hindering forces may be identified, the quality of being motivated defies definition.

Motivation is best understood from a scriptural starting point. True, science yields understanding and enriches the questions we pursue. But understanding motivation requires exploration of meaning in human existence and that rests in special revelation. Only when we understand our relationship with the Creator can we understand the nature of motivation. So, in considering the notion of motivation, the

followers of Christ must grasp the concept of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and how He prompts the urgency and fervor of our initiatives.

Motivation is not a mystery. We can understand it. We can motivate. More accurately, we can lead others to the experience from which they draw motivation. The process of understanding is centered in Scripture, but it also draws from the voices of social science. Understanding requires reflection on our beliefs about life in our time.

When we talk of motivation, a sense of fear exists—fear that we pursue motivation for our own selfish agendas, to get more of what we want from others. That fear emerges from honest reckoning with the weakness of our own humanity. Selfishness gets in the way of true understanding. Motivation can be rightly understood only when we are at peace with our own meaning; and that peace lies deeper than the interests that too often drive ministry. Peace is not discovered in success interpreted through the evaluations of our peers—peace comes through knowing why we live and do what we do. True, motivation increases productivity; but it can only be understood when approached in terms of meaning, serving, and joy.

The following is a spiritually grounded approach to motivation that engages the needs, gifts, and aspirations of the people we seek to serve and lead in God’s service. We begin with a consideration of several human approaches to motivation and then study what Scripture says.

## **Motivation in human experience: A theoretical approach**

Consider work. People have organized, or been organized, for work since ancient times. Look at the pyramids of Egypt. One of those edifices, the Great Pyramid, is 756 feet long on each side; 480 feet high; and has more than 2 million blocks of stone, each weighing more than 2 tons. The base of the structure misses a perfect square by only seven inches.<sup>1</sup> This edifice was built without the internal combustion engine, electronic calculators, or computers. People worked. Why? They were forced—enslaved.

Generally, ancient cultures distinguished creative initiatives from work and despised work, believing it interfered with the arts. So, they employed slaves for work. There are exceptions, and they increased as history moved forward. Medieval monks built monasteries and

recorded their time and process, apparently concerned with efficiency and productivity.<sup>2</sup> What motivated their work? They envisioned the outcome as glorifying a purpose to which they felt called.

The Protestant Reformation gave birth to the idea of work as a virtue. Theological ideas, which we explore below, came into view. People came to understand themselves as led by the Spirit of God, called to a spiritual priesthood, and gifted for service. Work took on new meaning. Work became fulfilling and respectable; idleness deplorable.

Consider the idea of productivity. Productivity is generally described as the ratio of desired consequent output to a measure of input. Output worth \$100 from input worth \$10 is productive. Output worth \$100 from input worth \$105 is not. Efficient management of this process is thought to be the key to an organization's survival.

In much of culture, motivation finds its utilitarian value around productivity. The question is, How can we motivate people so productivity increases? The problem with productivity as an idea is the issue of what we measure, what we truly value. The measure of the value of work when determined by one doing the work may be different from one wanting the work done. For instance, a painter values the beauty of the painting, while the shopkeeper values the artwork by what a buyer will pay for it. For one, the value is beauty; for the other marketability. Understanding motivation requires changing our concept of productivity, investing terms of productivity in the hands, or more accurately, the soul of the one actually doing the work.

A brief review of some social science research in motivation is helpful here. One such notable work is that of Elton Mayo, who based his research on the Hawthorne Works of the Western Electric Company of Chicago from 1924 to 1927. Mayo asserts that the social world of the adult is carried out around work

activity, and motivation is conditioned by social relationships. Recognition and affirmation are more important than physical elements, and social groups have greater influence over motivation than management.<sup>3</sup>

Abraham Maslow, whose research is most often noted in "A Theory of Human Motivation" (1943) and *Motivation and Personality* (1954), is best known for his hierarchy of human needs: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow asserts that this is a hierarchy of motivation, with humans seeking the next level. Maslow's contribution to our inquiry regarding motivation is revealed in his statement, "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man can be, he must be."<sup>4</sup>

Frederick Herzberg conducted research among 200 engineers and accountants in the Pittsburg area in the 1950s. He theorizes that people are motivated to find satisfaction through their work. He describes two dimensions of job satisfaction: hygiene and motivation. Hygiene factors, such as policies, supervision, salary, and working conditions, do not motivate, but they can dissatisfy. Motivation, he states, is linked to matters such as responsibility, actualization, and recognition, and is found in the work itself.<sup>5</sup>

Douglas McGregor, in his work *The Human Side of Enterprise* (1960), describes two management models, which he labels as Theory X and Theory Y. Theory X managers assume people dislike work and, therefore, must be controlled or rewarded. Theory Y managers, in contrast, believe energy given to work is as natural as play or rest. People seek responsibility, will direct themselves, and improve their work. McGregor asserts that his research proves thriving organizations are characterized by Theory Y managers.<sup>6</sup>

## The nature and practice of motivation

When considered extrinsic, motivation equates with control. We

can control the *behavior* of others by external factors such as policies, remuneration, or punishment. But behavior cannot be defined as motivation.

Motivation is doing something because we want to do it. It is intrinsic. It is observed in those we call self-starters, people who take initiative, those who find joy in getting things done.

For us as Christians, our theology shapes how we view motivation. What do we believe about God? I see a great deal of evidence that many believe in a controlling and punitive God. I see it in the tone of the Sabbath School teacher who begins the class with a quiz regarding the hours that Christians help or the number of Bible studies given. I hear it in the thundering sermons that remind us of our responsibility: "We are Christians, members of this body, so come back this afternoon to pass out literature!"

But that need not be the case. As leaders, we can motivate the church for a better ministry, and the motivational techniques we use should be ethical and compatible with the Word. The following is a brief summary of such techniques:

- Help people identify a need by exposing them to reality. We do that when we help a smoker visualize the effects of smoking, expose a careless driver to the human tragedy of an accident scene, or give Christian youth opportunities to see spiritual joy and genuine gratefulness among people in poverty as they construct a new school or church during a short-term mission trip.
- Give people responsibility. Responsibility is a great teacher. Realizing the opportunity to contribute through their efforts, people tap their intellectual potential and rise to new challenges.
- Provide affirmation and recognition. People respond positively to assurance that they are investing their time and energy in a way that

blesses others. Affirmation from the church assures them their lives mean something to God.

- Demonstrate our own enthusiasm for ministry. Pastors specialize in exhortation. But providing an example of motivation for ministry through our actions has great influence and power. That does not mean we must replicate every ministry in the church. It does, however, mean we should show passion that exceeds professional duties.
- Intensify interpersonal relationships. Relational networks are motivating. Teams that care for each other spend meaningful time in prayer and conversation and enjoy being together, and they experience greater motivation.
- Believe God can make everyone a significant person. God calls

people to what they can become. Envision that future. What you see for people shapes who they will become.

### The theological ground of motivation

But what is the theological grounding of Christian motivation? Among several possible answers, I like to choose the Christian concept of joy.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus spoke of triumphant joy emerging from the depths of the disciples' grief just prior to His crucifixion: " 'Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me'? I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. . . . Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you

will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy' " (John 16:19, 20, 22, NIV).

Like the first disciples in those hours of His death, we wait for the return of Christ. Do we wait in sorrow or joy?

A moment etched in my memory offers both a serious and humorous narrative of the dilemma that faces Adventist believers waiting for the return of Jesus. On a summer afternoon in 1990, the sun brightened the urban landscape as I emerged from what was then known as the Hoosier Dome in Indianapolis, Indiana. My heart was filled with joy. I had been with thousands of faith-filled believers attending the church's General Conference session. They had stories—stories of victory, stories of people who had surrendered to Jesus, of thousands baptized, of lives changed. I cheered; my eyes swelled with tears of joy; my heart overflowed.

So the demonstration facing me as I emerged from that stadium was a bitter contrast. Banners shouted the conviction of people marching back and forth: "Now is a time for sorrow," "Weep and lament." Picket signs bobbed up and down, punctuating their message. Literature pressed into my hand rebuked me for the joy I felt. *We live in the end time, repent, weep for your sins*, I was told.

I must confess, weeping comes easily for me. Is it doubt, this unrest in my soul? Or is it perhaps a more universal expression of human religious experience: sorrow mixed with longing? A hundred thousand perish in an earthquake in China. An anonymous child slips into death from starvation in Africa. A dear colleague is overcome with cancer. A stray bullet steals the life of a six-year-old girl in Philadelphia. Could this be my Father's world? Strangely, in the suffering, my longing for Jesus becomes a sweeter joy.

In His parting message of hope to the disciples, Jesus has a word for us. " 'I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble.

## More Resources

The following resources provide further study in the area of motivation. Careful reflection on the words of Jesus in context and on the comments compiled from Ellen G. White's writings are very helpful. The leadership literature chosen contributes to understanding principles of motivation, as do the selected works from fields of social science.

- Blackaby, Henry T., and Richard Blackaby. *Spiritual Leadership*. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2001.
- Bolman, Lee G., and Terrence E. Deal. *Reframing Organizations*. San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, 2008.
- Deci, Edward L., and Richard M. Ryan. *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-determination in Human Behavior*. New York: Plenum Press, 1985.
- Fisher, Elizabeth. "Motivation and Leadership in Social Work Management: A Review of Theories and Related Studies." *Administration in Social Work* 33, no. 4 (2009): 347–367.
- Jesus, in His prayers for and conversation with the disciples as recorded in John 13–17; 21.
- Niebuhr, Richard. "The Widened Heart." *Harvard Theological Review* 62, no. 2 (1969): 127–154.
- Rodin, R. Scott. *The Steward Leader*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010.
- Thomas, Kenneth W. *Intrinsic Motivation at Work*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009.
- White, Ellen G. *Christian Service*. Takoma Park, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1947.



But take heart! I have overcome the world' " (v. 33, NIV). In the remainder of their days, the eleven would experience poverty, wealth, persecution, miracles, shipwreck, and celebration. Simultaneously, they would testify, see the power of the Holy Spirit, and long to be with Jesus. They would wait, wait until death. Wait with joy!


We, too, often assign joy to future glory; a human experience to be delayed until Jesus returns. In doing so, we resign ourselves to wait in solemn, even passive expectancy. Jesus spoke to the Twelve of suffering but underscored their joy. Joy was His promise. Was He speaking of the end of time on this planet, beyond the life of service? Or did He believe their witness of the resurrected Christ would ensure their joy in the present? Jesus led the attention of the Twelve to the time of their mission throughout the exhortation of John 16. Joy was His wish for His followers in that period of time: " 'Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full' " (v. 24, NKJV). Jesus wished them joy during the remaining years of their lives of

service on earth. " 'These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world' " (v. 33, NKJV).

In Christ, we have joy! Right here, right now! Joy is a gift of grace. We do not achieve grace by working for it and so it is with joy. I have, too frequently, encountered the temptation to despair like the demonstrators pacing the plaza in Indianapolis, warning of doom to come; a doom I easily acknowledge as the condition of this earth without Jesus. But when the Creator draws us to Him, joy comes like a gift. Jesus is risen! He has overcome! As we long to be with Jesus, the sufferings only accentuate the longing. The longing itself multiplies joy.

People do things that give them joy. That is the key, the ground for motivation. We were created for joy. Yes, faith and love are inseparable in the experience of joy. And we do what we do for one reason that underlies all others: we have experienced the love of Jesus and

this love has transformed the way we see the world.

Do you want to motivate members for ministry? Understand its nature, give competent leadership that ethically promotes motivation, and most of all, live, preach, and teach the joy of our risen Christ! 

- 1 For a more complete description of the engineering and construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza, see N. Smith, "Classic Projects: The Great Pyramid at Giza," *Engineering and Technology* 6, no. 1 (February 2011): 112, 113.
- 2 Scott Reeves provides one illustration of the nature of work done by monks in constructing their monasteries in "Yorkshire's Medieval Cistercian Abbeys," *British Heritage* 32, no. 1 (March 2011): 50–55.
- 3 See Elton Mayo, "Supervision and Morale," *Journal of the National Institute of Industrial Psychology* 5, no. 5 (January 31, 1931): 248–260.
- 4 A. H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (July 1943): 383.
- 5 For an application of Herzberg's theory in a university setting, see Ryan E. Smerek and Marvin Peterson, "Examining Herzberg's Theory: Improving Job Satisfaction Among Non-academic Employees at a University," *Research in Higher Education* 48, no. 2 (March 2007): 229–250.
- 6 Elizabeth Fisher compares McGregor's work with researchers mentioned previously in this article; see Elizabeth Fisher, "Motivation and Leadership in Social Work Management: A Review of Theories and Related Studies," *Administration in Social Work* 33, no. 4 (October–December 2009): 347–367.
- 7 I recommend two sources to examine a theology of joy at a deeper level. The first is Roy Branson, "And Now . . . the Theology of Joy," *Encounter* 34 (Summer 1973): 233–245; the other is Richard Niebuhr's article, "The Widened Heart," *Harvard Theological Review* 62, no. 2 (April 1969): 127–154.

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## A revival in Hawaii

More than a hundred years ago, Ellen White penned this poignant appeal: "A revival of true godliness among us is the greatest and most urgent of all our needs. To see this should be our first work. A revival need be expected only in answer to prayer."\* If that was true then, it is more so today. It will not happen any other way—we must pray and ask.

Recognizing our desperate need of revival in our lives, homes, schools, and churches, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Hawaii embarked on a journey of prayer and revival. Every person received the book written by Dennis Smith,

### 40 Days of Prayer and Revival in Anticipation of the Second Coming.

For the first time in the history of the Adventist Church in Hawaii, the entire membership joined together in 40 days of prayer. We did so because we recognized our desperate need and desire to be filled with the Holy Spirit, live like Jesus, and stand strong in these last days.

But this was more than just praying for revival. The 40 days were also an invitation to pray for lost people. Each person made a list of at least five to pray for every day. For 40 days straight, thousands of lost people were lifted in prayer.

The results? Answered prayers, miracles, revival, healings, baptisms, and rebaptisms. Simply put, we will never be the same again!

—RALPH S. WATTS III, DMin, SERVES AS PRESIDENT OF THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH IN HAWAII, UNITED STATES.

\* Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), bk. 1, 121.

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