

The Experience Of Unity In The Early Church

Memory Text: “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” (Acts 2:42)

Setting The Stage: Christ is the key to unity. In order to experience genuine unity in the family, the church, etc. we must be “in Christ”—that is, Christ must be in us experiencing Jesus invitation to the church of Laodicea to “dine with [Him] and [Him] with [us]” (Rev. 3:20). Jesus Christ first brings a soul to Himself, but then He always unites that soul to other believers in His body, the church. The author of the lesson puts it this way:

“Church unity is the result of a shared spiritual experience in Jesus, who is the truth...Solid bonds of fellowship are forged in a common spiritual journey and experience.” (Adult Bible Study Guide, Oneness in Christ, p. 38)

We see this in the experience of the Millerites after the Great Disappointment. Their common experience in 1844 tied their hearts together as they sought to find an explanation for their disappointment. This experience gave birth to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the truth about the pre-Advent judgment and all that it entails.

We also see this in the experience of Jesus’ disciples after His ascension to heaven. There was incredible unity and harmony witnessed among men and women of various dispositions and backgrounds. It wasn’t always like that. Before Christ’s death there was disunity and vying for supremacy. But that all changed when Christ, a love for souls, and the mission He gave them was made front and center of their lives. That same experience still is possible today.

Sunday – Days Of Preparation

Acts 1:12-14, 3-25; Luke 24:52, 53; Acts 2:1

In the last hours spent with the disciples before His death, Jesus promised that He would not leave them alone. Another Comforter, the Holy Spirit, would be sent to accompany them in their ministry. On the day of His ascension Jesus renewed this promise. “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit’s power would be given to enable the disciples to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

Acts 1:12-14. What did the disciples do during this ten-day waiting period? Under

what conditions was the Holy Spirit poured out upon the early disciples? Under what conditions will He be poured out again in the last days?

1. They were obedient to the Lord's command. "And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father...Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount of Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey" (Acts 1:4, 12). They did what He asked. They went back to Jerusalem to wait. No questions asked. This must not have been easy for them to do, for it was in Jerusalem that Jesus was killed. Whatever the Lord asks us to do that is clearly outlined in His Word, obey it, even if it doesn't make sense and goes against every natural inclination.

2. They praised and blessed God. "And they...were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God" (Luke 24:52, 53). Church was the place they wanted to be. But it wasn't for potluck that they had come together. It wasn't for their family members or because they had grown up in the church that they congregated often. They came together to praise the Lord. No, the workweek wasn't on their mind. No, the basketball scores weren't related. No, what he said and she said weren't of concern. There was one dominant theme and interest and that was declaring the greatness of God.

3. They continued on with church business. "And they proposed two...And they prayed and said, 'You, O Lord know the hearts of all, show us which of these two You have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell" (Acts 1:23-25). Church business need to be conducted while they waited. Another apostle was needed to fill the place of Judas, so they cast lots and sought the guidance of the Lord.

We need to continue on with the Lord's business too. Jesus said 'Occupy till I come'. There is to be no idleness while we wait for the promised Spirit. There is a work to be done. The church needs to be built back up. Elders need to be reinstated as the under-shepherds of the church. Ministers need to be freed up to evangelize the lost and train the members of the church to work for their Master by implementing their spiritual gifts. Our talents are to be invested in the Lord's work. There shouldn't be one member not involved in some personal or church ministry.

4. They constantly supplicated the throne of grace. "These all continued in one accord in prayer and supplication" (Acts 1:14). They knew they had an Advocate with the Father now. They claimed the promises of their Savior that if they were to ask anything in His name the Father would do it.

I can imagine that during this waiting time their prayers were geared toward humbling their hearts in true repentance and confession of their unbelief (see Acts of the Apostles, pp. 36, 37). Oh, we need this spirit don't we? We need to spend quality time in prayer to be equipped for ministry, to let our hearts be broken, to plead for a greater infilling of the Holy Spirit.

5. They put away their difference and came close together in Christian fellowship. “Now when the day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place” (Acts 2:1). We must be clear here. Truth was not put aside for the sake of unity. Differences of opinion was. Whatever was not held up to the scrutiny of the Word needed to be set aside. Debate and argument, preference and opinion were subservient to the greater good of proclaiming the message of a crucified and risen Lord to the world.

Seeking unity while holding to differences of belief is futile. Jesus prayer, recorded in John 17, highlights the basis for Biblical unity. Only believers who are being sanctified by the truth can live in true harmony, in perfect unity. These disciples admitted their mistakes, confessed their wrongs to whomever it was appropriate, and pleaded for the promised Spirit. How we need to come off our hobby horses, get over ourselves, stop getting so easily offended, and be armed with the Spirit of God to take the gospel to those without hope. Amen?

Monday – From Babel To Pentecost

Acts 2:1-13; Genesis 11:1-9

Acts 2:1-4. The days of spiritual preparation, following Jesus’ ascension, culminated in the events of Pentecost. The first verse tells us that on that day, just before the Holy Spirit was poured upon the disciples, they were all together, of “one accord.” In the Old Testament, Pentecost was the second of three major feasts that every male Israelite was obligated to attend. It was held fifty days after Passover. During that feast the Hebrews presented to God the first fruits of their summer harvest as an offering of thanksgiving.

With the sound of a “mighty, rushing wind”, the Holy Spirit descended, and there appeared tongues like fire upon the heads of the disciples. What was the significance of this event? According to vv. 5-13, God gifted the disciples with the ability to speak in the languages of those who had traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost for the purpose of declaring to them the gospel of Jesus Christ.

At Babel God confused the language of the people to interrupt their plans to defy God (see Genesis 11). At Pentecost, God tears down the language barrier in order to lead people to acknowledge and glorify God.

Tuesday – Unity Of Fellowship

Acts 2:42-47

Peter preached a powerful sermon on the day of Pentecost. At the conclusion of his message many were convicted that they needed salvation. Amazingly, 3,000 people were baptized and joined the young church.

Acts 2:42-47. What activities did these early followers of Jesus do as a community of believers? What created this amazing unity of fellowship? The early Christian church knew one of the great secrets to their success.

They devoted themselves (gave constant attention) to the apostles teaching... They remained steadfast to the word of God and grew in knowledge of the truth. It was this that gave them solid footing. However, God's plan for them involved more.

They devoted themselves (gave constant attention) to fellowship. There was communion, or brotherhood between the believers. There was fraternalism, kinship, camaraderie, friendship, and community. They not only had mutual affect for one another, but they had a great deal of mutual conversation with each other. They didn't live as hermits but made an effort to be with one another. You saw one, you could be sure there were others. **"Break bread"** – Hebrew idiom meaning "to eat." Some give too much attention to this. ☺ More than sitting around having a cup of tea or socializing. This was to strengthen their faith and resolve.

They devoted themselves (gave constant attention) to prayer, both private and corporate. A family that prays together, stays together. **Worship** - individually, family, and corporate. "Convocations" - large, formal assemblies of people. There's something about large gatherings of mutually minded people (national anthem being sung). There's nothing better than God's people coming together!

Added to the church. Believers didn't live in isolation from each other, weren't baptized into a vacuum. A person can no more be a Christian and not belong to the church, than a soldier can be a soldier and not belong to the army, or a bee to be a bee and not belong to a beehive, or a salesman to be a salesman without customers.

Wednesday – Generosity & Greed

Acts 2:44, 45; 4:32-37; 5:1-11

The disciples also devoted themselves to (gave constant attention) each other's wellbeing. To have everything in common was not unusual in Jewish life. Visitors visiting the annual feasts often had their needs provided for them by friends in Jerusalem. But more is implied in Luke's words. The Christian's were thrown back upon themselves, and a new economy was established.

This was not Christian socialism, but likely an enlargement of the common purse (John 12:6) where believers were not compelled to give, but did so from a new found love for Christ. This would have been natural for a society built, not on selfish interests, but on sympathy and self-denial.

This was not indiscriminate giving however, for Paul referred to those who didn't provide for their own families as "worse than infidels," and encouraged those members who had widows to care for themselves and not charge the church with that responsibility (1 Tim. 5:8, 16). To the Thessalonians he declared that those that didn't work didn't eat (1 Thess. 3:10). Even still, they happily embraced the principle of being their "brothers keeper."

In this context Barnabas is introduced. He appears to be a wealthy person who owned land. Having sold his property for the benefit of the community, he brought the money to the apostles (Acts 4:36, 37). Barnabas is portrayed as an example to follow. Ananias and Sapphira, on the other hand, provide an example to run away from (Acts 5:1-11). They promised to give all their proceeds from the sale of their land, but kept back a portion. They were greedy, and their cherished greed led to lying, which resulted in corporal punishment and a warning to the young church to not ever lie to the Holy Spirit. "There is a sufficiency in the world for man's need but not for man's greed."

Thursday – Remember The Poor

2 Corinthians 9:8-15

"The sharing of one's resources was often a tangible expression of unity in the early church. The generosity described in the early chapters of the book of Acts continues later with Paul's inviting the churches he has established in Macedonia and Achaia to make a contribution for the poor in Jerusalem (see Acts 11:27–30; Gal. 2:10; Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:1–4).

"That gift becomes a tangible expression of the fact that churches, consisting mainly of Gentile believers, care and love their brothers and sisters of Jewish heritage in Jerusalem. In spite of cultural and ethnic differences, they form one body in Christ and cherish together the same gospel. This sharing with those in need not only reveals the unity that already existed in the church but also strengthens that unity." (Adult Bible Study Guide, Oneness in Christ, p. 43)

2 Corinthians 9:8–15. What does Paul say will be the results of the generosity revealed by the church at Corinth? (1) Physical benefit to those in need; (2) Spiritual benefit to those in need; (3) Ongoing grace to continue acts of generosity; (4) The fostering of brotherly affection and love thereby promoting unity.

"The experience of unity in the early church shows us what can still be done today. Unity, however, did not happen without intentional commitment on the part of all believers. The leaders of the early community saw it as their ministry to foster unity in Christ. As love between husband and wife and children is a commitment that must be intentionally fostered every day, so is unity among believers. The unity we have in Christ is both encouraged and made visible in a number of ways. The

obvious elements that fostered this unity in the early church were prayer, worship, fellowship, a common vision, and the study of God's Word. Not only did they understand their mission to preach the gospel to all nations, but they also realized that they had a responsibility of love and care toward each other. Their unity manifested itself in their generosity and mutual support within their own local fellowships, and more broadly, between church communities, even if long distances separated them." (Adult Bible Study Guide, Oneness in Christ, p. 43)

Further Thought

"This liberality on the part of the believers [in Acts 2:44, 45 and 4:32–35] was the result of the outpouring of the Spirit. The converts to the gospel were 'of one heart and of one soul.' One common interest controlled them—the success of the mission entrusted to them; and covetousness had no place in their lives. Their love for their brethren and the cause they had espoused was greater than their love of money and possessions. Their works testified that they accounted the souls of men of higher value than earthly wealth.

"Thus it will ever be when the Spirit of God takes possession of the life. Those whose hearts are filled with the love of Christ will follow the example of Him who for our sake became poor, that through His poverty we might be made rich. Money, time, influence—all the gifts they have received from God's hand, they will value only as a means of advancing the work of the gospel. Thus it was in the early church; and when in the church of today it is seen that by the power of the Spirit the members have taken their affections from the things of the world, and that they are willing to make sacrifices in order that their fellow men may hear the gospel, the truths proclaimed will have a powerful influence upon the hearers." (The Acts of the Apostles, pp. 70, 71)