

Revival and Reformation

Unity: The Bond of Revival

Lesson #7 for August 17, 2013

Scriptures: John 17:9-11,20-24; 1 Corinthians 12:12-18; Acts 1:8; 4:32,33; 15:1-31; Matthew 18:16-20.

1. This lesson is about unity. What is the basis for Christian unity? The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a worldwide church. Social and cultural differences abound. Will it ever be possible to have unity in such a large group? What is the difference between unity and uniformity?
2. At some time, almost every one of us has experienced sibling rivalry, either personally or observed in others. Brothers and sisters may fight incessantly—usually to the frustration of their parents. But, if a common enemy comes in to attack the family in any way, suddenly, brothers and sisters tend to stand shoulder to shoulder in opposition to the external force. Could that happen in the church?
3. The disciples had spent years fighting over who was going to have the top positions in the earthly kingdom they expected Jesus to set up. That fighting continued even into the upper room on Thursday evening just before Jesus was arrested. (Luke 22:24) But, when they realized the common mission that needed to be accomplished, they were able to join together with one accord. (Acts 5:12)
4. Read John 17:9-11,20-24. In His great prayer just before His crucifixion, Jesus prayed for unity among His first disciples; but, He also prayed for unity among all those who would believe because of their words. That certainly includes all of us. In fact, the first group of disciples got together in Jerusalem and shared everything they had. (Acts 4:32,33)

To us today, as verily as to the first disciples, the promise of the Spirit belongs. God will today endow men and women with power from above, as He endowed those who on the Day of Pentecost heard the word of salvation. At this very hour His Spirit and His grace are for all who need them and will take Him at His word. (8T 20.3)

Notice that it was after the disciples had come into perfect unity, when they were no longer striving for the highest place, that the Spirit was poured out. They were of one accord. All differences had been put away. And the testimony borne of them after the Spirit had been given is the same. Mark the word: “The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul.” Acts 4:32. The Spirit of Him who died [21] that sinners might live animated the entire congregation of believers. (8T 20.4)

5. Could a group of Seventh-day Adventist Christians in the 21st century have a similar experience? What would be the characteristics of such a group?
6. As we have noted in previous lessons, the gospel was soon carried to every corner of the Roman Empire. There were obvious differences in caste, social status, and gender. Accepting the Christian faith placed many of them at risk of death. Then, there was no Bill of Rights in the Roman Empire to protect religious liberty and there was no mass communication.
7. But, the entrance of Christianity transformed much of society in those days. How could Christians fight with each other when they realized that Jesus would have been willing to die for each one of them.

The relations between God and each soul are as distinct and full as though there were not another soul upon the earth to share his watch care, not another soul for whom he gave his beloved Son. (*Steps to Christ* 100.1)

One soul is of such value that, in comparison with it, worlds sink into insignificance... (*2SP* 394.1)

One soul saved in the kingdom of God is worth more than 10,000 worlds like this. (*RH*, April 1, 1880, par 1)

Christ would have died for one soul in order that that one might live through the eternal ages. (*8T* 72.3)

8. With the task of carrying the message of the gospel to the entire world, how can we stop to fight with each other? Every soul that we can reach out to is of immense value in God's sight. Their theology may be wrong, but we should still love them while we seek to live a life that will be an example to all around us. Self must die.
9. Peter and Paul both suggested that every Christian is to be a part of the great whole even though they may have differences. First Corinthians 12:12-18 suggests that just as the different parts of the body serve different functions but are all parts of the same body, so every Christian should have his important role in the work of the church. First Peter 2:4,5 and Ephesians 2:19-22 suggest that we are all to be built together as a temple to God. Each person is to serve his function in that temple.
10. Read John 13:34,35. What do these words imply? Could it really be true that "If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples." (*GNB*) Does that imply that there is so much chaos, disunity, and animosity in the rest of the world that when a group of people come together in Christian love, they stand out like a mighty light? Could that be said about your church or even your Sabbath School group?
11. Read Acts 1:8; 4:33; 5:42; 9:31; and 28:28-31. The early disciples came together in almost a communal type of living. They lived, ate, and most importantly prayed, taught, and preached as one. (See Luke 8:1-3) They were consumed with the mission of spreading the gospel to the world.
12. Peter referred to their mission as a "present truth" in 2 Peter 1:12, (*KJV*): "Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth." It certainly was! In one generation, they carried the gospel message about their Friend Jesus Christ to every corner of the Roman Empire. Do Adventists have an end-time "present truth"?
13. Seventh-day Adventists have come to regard the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6-12 as our message to carry to the entire world in the time of the end. How well are we doing that? What percentage of the world's population even knows that the three angels' messages exist? Have we designed a simple, easy-to-understand explanation of the three angels' messages and the great controversy theme that our members can use to speak to others outside our church?
14. Let us be honest to recognize that differences will arise among the members in any human organization. How should those differences be resolved? Read Matthew 18:15-20. If a personal difference arises between two church members, Christ has given us the steps that we need to take to resolve it.
15. But, there are times when issues arise affecting larger groups of the church. Read Acts 15:1-31. The Jewish Christians were very concerned that if Paul and his friends continued

to spread the gospel among the Gentiles, soon, the Christian church would be mainly a Gentile organization! They wanted to keep its Jewish nature. They believed that Christianity should be a subunit of Judaism. They thought every Christian should follow the Jewish rules and regulations. Of course, Paul was adamantly opposed to those restrictions. One of the requirements agreed upon at the Jerusalem council described in Acts 15 was that Christians should not eat food offered to idols. Paul was there and apparently acceded to the common idea that that should be one of the requirements. But, later as he dealt with that problem in Corinth, he took a very different approach. Read Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, especially 10:25-31, to see his advice. Did he dare to disagree with the larger group?

16. Of course, there are some things on which we cannot compromise in any way. When it comes to the core teachings of the gospel—understanding why Jesus came and died and the essence of the issues in the great controversy—there is no room for compromise. (Galatians 1:6-9) Would you dare to speak like that? What was the issue there?
17. So, how could all these things be implemented in our day? Careful research has been done among people who choose to join a church in the 21st century. As we unfortunately know, many who choose to join one of our churches soon leave. There are three reasons why people stay in their new church. 1) They believe in the core teachings of the church. 2) They become involved in church activities. 3) They develop a close friendship and fellowship with members of the church body. To remain in the church, new members need to have at least two of these three reasons, and ideally, all three. When new members join one of our churches through an evangelistic campaign or even through personal evangelism, do we make extra efforts to reach out and place our arms around them? What does this tell us about unity?

What was the result of the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost? The glad tidings of a risen Saviour were carried to the uttermost parts of the inhabited world. As the disciples proclaimed the message of redeeming grace, hearts yielded to the power of this message. The church beheld converts flocking to her from all directions. Backsliders were reconverted. Sinners united with believers in seeking the pearl of great price. Some who had been the bitterest opponents of the gospel became its champions. The prophecy was fulfilled, "He that is feeble . . . shall be as David; and the house of David . . . as the angel of the Lord." Zechariah 12:8. Every Christian saw in his brother a revelation of divine love and benevolence. One interest prevailed; one subject of emulation swallowed up all others. The ambition of the believers was to reveal the likeness of Christ's character and to labor for the enlargement of His kingdom. (*Acts of the Apostles* 48.1; compare *FLB* 150)

18. Read Acts 1:14; 12:5,12; 6:7; and Matthew 28:16-20. The early Christians prayed together, talked together, studied God's Word together, and went out to share their faith with anyone who would listen. Even priests (Were they Sadducees?) and Pharisees (Acts 15:5) became members of the new Christian church.

In these first disciples was presented marked diversity. They were to be the world's teachers, and they represented widely varied types of character. In order successfully to carry forward the work to which they had been called, these men, differing in natural characteristics and in habits of life, needed to come into unity of feeling, thought, and action. This unity it was Christ's object to secure. To this end He sought to bring them into unity with Himself.

The burden of His labor for them is expressed in His prayer to His Father, "That they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us;" "that the world may know that Thou has sent Me, and hast loved them, as Thou hast loved Me." John 17:21,23. His constant prayer for them was that they might be sanctified through the truth; and He prayed with assurance, knowing that an Almighty decree had been given before the world was [21] made. He knew that the gospel of the kingdom would be preached to all nations for a witness; He knew that truth armed with the omnipotence of the Holy Spirit, would conquer in the battle with evil, and that the bloodstained banner would one day wave triumphantly over His followers. (*Acts of the Apostles 20.2*)

19. When dealing with a worldwide church where social and cultural beliefs vary so greatly, how do we maintain unity? How much freedom should subunits of the church such as divisions, unions, conferences, and even local congregations have to differ from the body without causing a complete split? When such issues as the role of women in ministry are discussed, how do they impact our unity?
20. We have spoken about various aspects of unity. Read John 17:9-11, 20-24. Is it really possible for human beings from different backgrounds to come together and have the kind of unity that exists between the Father and Son? Or, is that just an ideal goal? If we are focused on our mission of finishing the gospel, can we tolerate some differences in opinion? (Romans 14:1-5)
21. Paul's illustration about the human body clearly suggested that different parts have different functions. How much variation does that suggest might exist between different church subunits as we seek to finish the gospel? How many of the differences that arise in the church arise because some individual or small group of individuals is just being stubborn? If we were truly focused 100% on the mission of finishing the gospel, how many of these small differences would disappear?

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