

Oneness in Christ

Church Organization and Unity

Lesson #12 for December 22, 2018

Scriptures: Ephesians 5:23-27; Matthew 16:19; 20:25-28; 28:18-20; Titus 1:9; Galatians 6:1-2.

1. “As Seventh-day Adventists, we are Protestant Christians who believe that salvation is through faith alone in what Jesus Christ has accomplished for humanity.”—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Saturday, December 15.
2. What do we mean when we say: “Faith alone in what Jesus Christ has accomplished for humanity”? Does that leave out the rest of the universe? How does that fit with our understanding of the great controversy? According to the Bible and Ellen White, the entire universe is involved in the great controversy.
3. Jesus tried to prepare His disciples for a lifetime of service before He left them a few days before Pentecost. He recognized that they would need to work together, as far as possible, to spread the gospel. He also recognized that church organization would be necessary for the efficient spread of the gospel. That is what churches are for. Church leaders are supposed to follow the example of Jesus.
4. Our Bible study guide suggests that church leaders are supposed to be chosen because they “illustrate the example of Jesus.”—*Ibid.** Is that always true? Is there any politicking going on as we choose church leaders? This lesson will focus on why we need church organization and what difference that might make.

Colossians 1:18-20: ¹⁸He [Jesus] is the head of his body, the church; he is the source of the body’s life. He is the firstborn Son, who was raised from death, in order that he alone might have the first place in all things. ¹⁹For it was by God’s own decision that the Son has in himself the full nature of God. ²⁰Through the Son, then, God decided to bring the whole universe back to himself. God made peace through his Son’s blood on the cross and so brought back to himself all things, both on earth and in heaven.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Colossians 1:18–20). New York: American Bible Society. [Content in brackets is added.]

5. With Christ as the head of the church, God plans to bring the entire universe together again. What are members of the rest of the universe supposed to learn from us here on planet earth? What do you think they are learning? The consequences of rebellion!
6. No serious Bible student would question the idea that Christ is the head of the church. But, how does that work out in practical reality? What about in the middle of the Dark Ages?
7. Read Ephesians 5:21-27. In these verses the ideal relationship between a husband and a wife is used as a symbol for how Christ is related to the church and vice versa. So, Christ has authority over the church. He is the Savior of the church which is His body. The church must submit itself completely to Christ. Christ loves the church so much that He gave His life for the church. He did that to purify the church, dedicating it to Himself—pure and faultless.

8. Are you comfortable with those ideas? Human leaders have abused the idea of authority while forcing submission on those who are below them so frequently that most people instinctively rebel against the idea of submission. But, if we recognize that the One to whom we are to submit is Jesus Christ, all problems should go away.

The church is built upon Christ as its foundation; it is to obey Christ as its head. It is not to depend upon man, or be controlled by man. Many claim that a position of trust in the church gives them authority to dictate what other men shall believe and what they shall do. This claim God does not sanction. The Saviour declares, "All ye are brethren." All are exposed to temptation, and are liable to error. Upon no finite being can we depend for guidance. The Rock of faith is the living presence of Christ in the church. Upon this the weakest may depend, and those who think themselves the strongest will prove to be the weakest, unless they make Christ their efficiency. "Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm." The Lord "is the Rock, His work is perfect." "Blessed are all they that put their trust in Him." Jeremiah 17:5; Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 2:12.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages** 414.3.

9. How can we develop a relationship of dependence upon Christ instead of depending upon our fellow human beings? Humans can be manipulated; God cannot!
10. It is quite clear from reading the Gospels that the disciples of Christ believed that He would one day be Ruler over the nation of Israel and that they would hold high positions in His government. This led to their having repeated arguments about which of them was the greatest. (See Mark 9:33-34; Luke 9:46; **22:24**.) In fact, they were arguing about who was greatest as they were entering the upper room for the Last Supper! He washed their feet!
11. Jesus set forth a very clear principle for Christian leaders.

Matthew 20:25-28: ²⁵So Jesus called them all together and said, "You know that the rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority. ²⁶This, however, is not the way it shall be among you. If one of you wants to be great, he must be the servant of the rest; ²⁷and if one of you wants to be first, he must be your slave – ²⁸like the Son of Man, who did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life to redeem many people."—*Good News Bible*.*

"In this concise passage Jesus presents us with two models of authority. The first is the Roman idea of authority. In this model, the elite stand hierarchically over others. They have the power to make decisions and expect submission from those below them. Jesus clearly rejected this model of authority when He stated, 'Not so with you!' Instead He presented the disciples with a breathtakingly new model of authority, a thorough rejection, or reversal, of the hierarchical model with which they were familiar."—Darius Jankiewicz, "Serving Like Jesus: Authority in God's Church," *Adventist Review*, March 13, 2014, p. 18.—[as quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Monday, December 17].

12. Will God continue to serve us throughout eternity? Clearly, Christ was emphasizing and demonstrating a completely new kind of leadership. We call it *servant leadership*. He

recognized that authoritative structures must exist; but, He also emphasized that those who want to be leaders of those structures must be servants to all.

Christ was establishing a kingdom on different principles. He called men, not to authority, but to service, the strong to bear the infirmities of the weak. Power, position, talent, education, placed their possessor under the greater obligation to serve his fellows.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages** 550.3.

13. The ultimate example of servant leadership for Christians has always been that recorded in John 13:1-20. Apparently, the upper room had been prepared for them to come and enjoy the Passover supper together. We do not know exactly what happened; but, apparently, a servant had left the basin of water and the towel in the room but was nowhere to be found when the group arrived. After having argued about who should be the greatest, none of the disciples was ready to wash the feet of his fellow disciples. And so, as we know, Jesus took off His outer garment, wrapped the towel around His waist, and began washing the feet of each of the twelve disciples, including Judas. How would you feel if you knew that God was washing your dirty feet? Do you think the Father or the Holy Spirit would have done that? Is Jesus any less God than They are?

14. Read 2 Timothy 2:15 and Titus 1:9.

2 Timothy 2:15: Do your best to win full approval in God's sight, as a worker who is not ashamed of his work, one who correctly teaches the message of God's truth.—*Good News Bible*.*

Titus 1:9: He must hold firmly to the message which can be trusted and which agrees with the doctrine. In this way he will be able to encourage others with the true teaching and also to show the error of those who are opposed to it.—*Good News Bible*.*

15. According to these verses, a true Christian leader is to faithfully teach the truth about God and point out errors that people might otherwise believe. Keeping the doctrines and principles as pure as possible is essential. Our set of fundamental teachings and beliefs is one of the main unifying forces in our church. While they may be variously understood by groups in different continents and different cultures, nevertheless, they do provide a unifying basis for belief.

16. In his final letter that we have preserved for us, Paul reminded Timothy of something he, no doubt, had said to him many times earlier.

2 Timothy 4:1-5: ¹In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and because he is coming to rule as King, I solemnly urge you ²to preach the message, to insist upon proclaiming it (whether the time is right or not), to convince, reproach, and encourage, as you teach with all patience. ³The time will come when people will not listen to sound doctrine, but will follow their own desires and will collect for themselves more and more teachers who will tell them what they are itching to hear. ⁴They will turn away from listening to the truth and give their attention to legends. ⁵But you must keep control of yourself in all circumstances; endure suffering, do the work of a preacher of the Good News, and perform your whole duty as a servant of God.—*Good News Bible*.*

17. The future would not be easy for Christian leaders. He reminded Timothy that Jesus is coming back to rule as King; but, before that time comes, people will try to choose teachers who will say what people want them to say rather than rebuking their problems and guiding them into all truth. Why don't they do that? Timothy was challenged to endure suffering—if need be—and to be a preacher of the good news.

18. A few sentences earlier, we have his words as recorded in 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

2 Timothy 3:16-17: ¹⁶All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living, ¹⁷so that the person who serves God may be fully qualified and equipped to do every kind of good deed.—*Good News Bible*.*

19. Church groups who have leaders who are following those guidelines are truly blessed.

20. Are the leaders in your church clearly working together to encourage unity and cooperation?

21. One of the most difficult things that church leaders have to deal with is discipline. Discipline is necessary for at least two reasons: (1) To preserve the purity and example of the church, and (2) To promote purity among church members. When open sin occurs among church members, something must be done. Jesus Himself set forth a principal for dealing with such sins.

Matthew 18:15-20: ¹⁵“If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back. ¹⁶But if he will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you, so that ‘every accusation may be upheld by the testimony of two or more witnesses,’ as the scripture says. ¹⁷And if he will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally, if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or a tax collector. [See Luke 19:1-10 to see how Jesus treated Zacchaeus, the tax collector.]

Prohibiting and Permitting

¹⁸ “And so I tell all of you: what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.

¹⁹ “And I tell you more: whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them.”—*Good News Bible** (Matthew 18:15-20). [Content in brackets is added.]

22. In order to be an effective witness to the world around it, the church must be pure and Christlike. Discipline is sometimes necessary to maintain that ideal.

23. When discipline becomes necessary, we should remember the advice of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 7:1-5 and Paul as recorded in Galatians 6:1-2. Do we always behave in the kindest, gentlest way when trying to reprove evil? Do those affected by the discipline recognize that the discipline is necessary and that it is being administered in love? Are our actions redemptive and not punitive?

24. It has often been said that the church is a hospital for sinners and not a club for saints. Do we always recognize that by our behavior?

25. We also need to recognize that the church has one essential purpose and that is to spread the gospel to those around it. (See Matthew 28:18-20.) Notice that in His words to His disciples, Jesus gave them four commands: (1) Go, (2) Make disciples, (3) Baptize, and (4) Teach. The way the sentence is organized in Greek, the major emphasis is on *making disciples*.
26. Do we behave in ways that demonstrate clearly that we know that our primary purpose for being organized as churches is to spread the gospel?

Christ did not tell His disciples that their work would be easy.... He assured them that He would be with them; and that if they would go forth in faith, they should move under the shield of Omnipotence. He bade them be brave and strong; for One mightier than angels would be in their ranks—the General of the armies of heaven. He made full provision for the prosecution of their work and took upon Himself the responsibility of its success. So long as they obeyed His word, and worked in connection with Him, they could not fail. Go to all nations, He bade them. Go to the farthest part of the habitable globe and be assured that My presence will be with you even there. Labor in faith and confidence; for the time will never come when I will forsake you. I will be with you always, helping you to perform your duty, guiding, comforting, sanctifying, sustaining you, giving you success in speaking words that shall draw the attention of others to heaven.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 29.1.

27. Could we do this?
28. Christ has promised to be with us until the end. Do we behave appropriately in light of that promise?

“Principles of good leadership apply in all forms of society, including the church. However, the leader in the church must be more than a leader. He must also be a servant.

“There is an apparent contradiction between being a leader and being a servant. How can one lead and serve at the same time? Does not the leader occupy a position of honor? Does he not command and expect others to obey him? How, then, does he occupy the lower position of being a servant, of receiving orders and fulfilling them?

“In order to resolve the paradox we must look at Jesus. He supremely represented the principle of leadership that serves. His whole life was one of service. And at the same time He was the greatest leader the world has ever seen.”—G. Arthur Keough, *Our Church Today: What It Is and Can Be* (Washington, D.C., and Nashville: Review and Herald, 1980), p. 106.—[as quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Friday, December 21].

29. Have you known any church leaders in the 21st century who are truly servant leaders? How can we develop more of that kind of leadership?
30. When administering church discipline, do we always follow the golden rule as recorded in Matthew 7:12?

31. In light of what we have studied in this lesson so far, it seems clear that church leadership is essential. But, to find the right kind of leaders is a real challenge among selfish Laodiceans in our day.
32. In church committees and in other church activities, do we always behave in a manner that recognizes that Christ is the head of the church? Jesus made it very clear that Christian leaders are not supposed to be like leaders in the world. Do we make it easy for our church leaders to be servant leaders? Are we prepared to assist them by using the spiritual gifts that have been given to us? Is it clear in your church that the way the church itself is organized is resulting in the spread of the gospel?
33. One of the most outstanding servant leaders of modern times was Mahatma Gandhi. Unfortunately, although he was attracted to Christianity because of what he learned about the life of Christ, he told Christians that the reason he did not become a Christian was because there were so few Christians who acted like Jesus. What would Mahatma Gandhi say if he were to visit your church? What made his life so powerful? Could someone who followed after the Gandhi model be a church leader in the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Are we constantly offering prayers to God, asking His guidance so that we may serve and that He may guide us in choosing spiritual leaders for our church organizations?
34. We all recognize that some kind of church organization is necessary. What will happen when because of a national Sunday law and an international Sunday law, it becomes impossible to have a Seventh-day Adventist Church organization? That, of course, will happen very near the end of time. Will all witnessing and sharing of the gospel cease at that point?
35. Is it obvious to outside observers that Christ is the head of your church?

In his book *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2012), Jonathan Leeman identifies **four ways** in which church discipline is a loving response that protects the unity of the church while advancing its mission. **First**, church discipline shows love for the individual by helping him or her recognize wrongdoing and with it the need for repentance. Church discipline is redemptive in nature and not simply punitive. **Second**, church discipline shows a love for the church because it aims to protect from harm and temptation those who might be new or weak in the faith. **Third**, church discipline shows love for the world beyond the church walls by allowing the church to project a witness that more accurately displays the transforming power of the gospel. **Finally**, church discipline shows love for Christ through both obedience and the safeguarding of His reputation.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 161. [Bold type is added.]

36. Has the Seventh-day Adventist Church been successful in promoting the development of servant leaders? Could we develop a system for encouraging that kind of leadership?

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