

Oneness in Christ

The Experience of Unity in the Early Church

Lesson #5 for November 3, 2018

Scriptures: Acts 1:12-14; 2:5-13,42-47; 4:32-37; 5:1-11; 2 Corinthians 9:8-15; Revelation 14:12.

1. Unity between and among human beings comes about because of shared experiences. Church unity comes about because of shared beliefs, shared experiences, and the blessing of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told us in John 14:6 (NKJV*): "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through Me." As we will see, the early church was drawn together by their relationship with Jesus Christ.
2. Early adventists had a similar experience in the Millerite movement. Their common experience leading up to 1844 caused them to develop a bond of fellowship that survived through the Great Disappointment. This eventually led to the organization of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1863.
3. Christ's original disciples were a very diverse group. Matthew worked for Herod and through Herod collected taxes for the Roman government; Simon the Patriot would have done anything possible to eliminate the Roman government. Many of them were fishermen. But, spending that time with Jesus Christ developed within them a fellowship that could not be broken. See Matthew 10:1-3 and Luke 6:12-16.
4. Jesus knew that they would be severely tried because of the events of crucifixion weekend. Therefore, He promised to send them another Comforter just like Himself. (John 14:16) The Spirit would guide them into some incredible experiences including further truths. More than that, they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. (Acts 1:5,8)
5. If you had been given that kind of promise by Jesus, what would you do to prepare yourself for it? How would you have responded? Did they think of becoming martyrs?

Acts 1:12-14: ¹² Then the apostles went back to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, which is about a kilometer away from the city. ¹³They entered the city and went up to the room where they were staying: Peter, John, James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Patriot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴**They gathered frequently to pray as a group, together with the women and with Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers.**—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Acts 1:12–14). New York: American Bible Society. [Bold type is added.]

6. Those days of preparation between the time of Christ's ascension and the Pentecost must have been times of intense study, spiritual awakening, and reformation.

As the disciples waited for the fulfillment of the promise, they humbled their hearts in true repentance and confessed their unbelief. **As they called to remembrance the words that Christ had spoken to them before His death they understood more fully their meaning. Truths which had passed from their memory were again brought to their minds, and these they repeated to one another.** They reproached themselves for their misapprehension of the Saviour. Like a procession, scene after scene of His

wonderful life passed before them. **As they meditated upon His pure, holy life they felt that no toil would be too hard, no sacrifice too great, if only they could bear witness in their lives to the loveliness of Christ's character.** Oh, if they could but have the past three years to live over, they thought, how differently they would act! If they could only see the Master again, how earnestly they would strive to show Him how deeply they loved Him, and how sincerely they sorrowed for having ever grieved Him by a word or an act of unbelief! But they were comforted by the thought that they were forgiven. **And they determined that, so far as possible, they would atone for their unbelief by bravely confessing Him before the world.**

... Putting away all differences, all desire for the supremacy, they came close together in Christian fellowship.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 36.1-37.1. [Bold type is added.]

7. What would happen if an experience like that could take place in one of our churches today? Only by the grace of God!
8. Pentecost—occurring 50 days after Passover, and thus, named Pentecost, meaning *fiftieth*—was the second major festival of the Jewish spiritual year. Did the disciples have any idea what was going to happen on that day? They were gathered together in Jerusalem in preparation. The 40 days after Passover and before the ascension (Acts 1:3-9) followed by those 10 days of preparation left them all together and of one accord and in one place. (Acts 2:1)
9. Pentecost was a celebration of the first fruits of the season. The barley which came up first was ready to be harvested. And thus, it was a time of great celebration. Based on Exodus 19:1, it is possible that they had begun to celebrate the giving of the law on Mount Sinai at the time of “Pentecost,” fifty days after the exodus from Egypt.
10. We do not know exactly how the events of Pentecost worked out; but, apparently the disciples and other believers were gathered, probably in the upper room. At the beginning, there was a sound of a mighty Wind filling the house where they were sitting and bringing down on each of them tongues of fire, filling them with the Holy Spirit. They began to speak in other languages the words that God gave them. (Acts 2:2-4)
11. Do we know how many were involved in that outpouring? Did it involve only the 12 disciples? Or, might it have included some of the 120 followers mentioned earlier? Were there any women who received the outpouring at that time? And what about other occasions when the Spirit was poured out such as those recorded in Acts 8:17 and 10:44-46 (which Peter later discussed in Acts 11:17 and 15:8)? And do not forget Acts 19:6 which discusses the events in Ephesus.
12. The results were beyond their wildest imaginations! Apparently, shortly after they had received those tongues of fire, they moved to the temple courtyard. What happened next was amazing. See Acts 2:5-13. Were the tongues of fire still visible in the courtyard?
13. This was certainly a fitting time to have a joyous feast. Remember the story of Babel recorded in Genesis 11 at which time the languages of humanity were confused by the Lord, causing the people to scatter across the earth. At Pentecost, God was partially repairing that problem, giving the disciples the ability to speak fluently the languages of any peoples that they came in contact with in spreading the gospel. As usual, Peter took a leading role in those events. He stood up and began to preach. As a result of that sermon, 3000 people chose to become followers of Christ and showed their commitment by being

baptized. We have no idea where those baptisms took place. Since it was the time of Pentecost, people were there from many parts of the known world. They must have been very excited to hear a recounting of some of the events of the life of Jesus.

Acts 2:42-47: ⁴²They spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers.

⁴³ Many miracles and wonders were being done through the apostles, and everyone was filled with awe. ⁴⁴All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. ⁴⁵They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed. ⁴⁶Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, ⁴⁷praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.—*Good News Bible*.*

14. If you had been one of the people who had come from a long distance and if you suddenly found yourself among those being baptized, what would you want to do next? It seems clear that everyone wanted to learn more about those new ideas and those new beliefs. The disciples were continually offering classes in the temple courtyard; and then, they ate together in private homes, all the time teaching, listening, and learning.
15. Since that was the time of Pentecost, we must assume that all those who were there at that point were Jews or had some Jewish background. Did they need to be taught about the Sabbath? Or, about the traditional teachings of the Old Testament? Probably not. But, now the Hope of the Jewish nation for 2000 years had come and lived His life, and they wanted to hear about every detail. Wouldn't you?
16. It seems clear that after having sessions of learning in the temple courtyard, they scattered to private homes where they shared meals together. There developed a very close bond of fellowship among them. Who was involved? See Luke 8:1-3.
17. Since they spent a considerable amount of time in the temple courtyard—in the area where that marketplace from which Jesus had scattered the merchants and money changers on two previous occasions—they were preaching and teaching right under the noses of the Sadducees and the Pharisees!

The priests and rulers were greatly enraged at this wonderful manifestation, but they dared not give way to their malice, for fear of exposing themselves to the violence of the people. They had put the Nazarene to death; but here were His servants, unlettered men of Galilee, telling in all the languages then spoken, the story of His life and ministry. The priests, determined to account for the miraculous power of the disciples in some natural way, declared that they were drunken from partaking largely of the new wine prepared for the feast. Some of the most ignorant of the people present seized upon this suggestion as the truth, but the more intelligent knew it to be false; and those who understood the different languages testified to the accuracy with which these languages were used by the disciples.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 40.2.

18. What could we as local Sabbath school classes or even local churches possibly learn from those experiences of the early church?
19. One of the natural occurrences or outgrowths of that fellowship together was the

development of mutual support—both spiritual and financial. See Acts 2:44-45 above.

20. Was this outpouring of good will and financial support occasioned by the fact that some of the new believers were very poor? It was probably also true that the believers were quite certain that Jesus's promise that He would come back was understood to mean very soon, within the immediate future.
21. Some have suggested that unless one shares goods in a kind of communal way, he cannot experience the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and experience Pentecostal-like blessings. Is that true? Well, that community feeling in which they sold their houses and properties and shared with everyone did not seem to persist very long in the history of the Christian church. Since the disciples and others felt certain that the return of Jesus would be very soon, it was much easier for people to be willing to sell their possessions and share with others.
22. One of the important contributors to this early process was Barnabas. See Acts 4:32-37. As you remember, Barnabas was a Jew from Cypress who had gone to Jerusalem. What do you think inspired Barnabas to sell that piece of property and give the money to the apostles?
23. Unfortunately, not everyone was on board with that new sharing plan. Read Acts 5:1-11. Ananias and Sapphira had a piece of property that was quite valuable. They were caught up in the spirit of giving among the new believers. They wanted to be a part of it and to be honored among those who were contributing. But, when they sold their property, they actually received more money for it than they expected. Thus, they decided to keep a part of it and only gave part of it to the apostles.
24. To cover up what had happened, they chose to lie to Peter and to the Holy Spirit. As we know from the story, the results were deadly. Each of them—coming in about three hours apart—fell dead before Peter. What do you think happened on that occasion? Were they so stressed that they both had heart attacks? Were they so controlled by the Devil that God said: "Okay Satan, go-ahead; you can kill them"? The original story does not tell us what the cause of their death was.
25. What do you suppose would have happened if Ananias and Sapphira had gotten away with their deceit? Sometime later, might others have discovered that those two had held back a portion of the money? What kind of impact would that have had on the growth of the early church and honesty? What is your understanding of Acts 5:11? Compare Acts 5:5.
Acts 5:11: The whole church and all the others who heard of this were terrified.—*Good News Bible*.*
26. Who caused that terror? The deaths of those two were caused/permitted by God.
27. Review your understanding of the Ten Commandments. (Exodus 20:1-17) It is interesting to note that the last commandment—about covetousness—is the only one that is not connected with a death penalty somewhere in the writings of Moses. Why was that? Covetousness takes place in the human heart or mind. It is not something that is visible or apparent to those around. Some have suggested that covetousness is actually the first step in sin and is the root behind breaking of any of the other commandments. Would that be true in your thinking?
28. This sharing of one's resources with other members in the church occurred on more than one occasion in the early church. Later, the church at Antioch sent some relief to the church in Jerusalem. (Acts 11:27-30)

29. Even later, of course, Paul collected a large offering from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia to take to the church in Jerusalem. (See Galatians 2:10; Romans 15:26; and 1 Corinthians 16:1-4.) Paul suggested that just as the Jewish believers had shared their spiritual blessings with the Gentile believers, the Gentile believers should share their material blessings with the Jewish believers. Would that principle still apply in our day? How might we actually apply it? We regularly collect mission offerings in our churches. Does that fulfill this requirement?
30. Many church members in our day are relatively poor. This is especially true in Third World countries. But, speaking on God's behalf, Paul said that God will care for those who give generously. Read 2 Corinthians 9:8-15.
31. Could we depend on that prophecy for the support of Christians in our day? This story from the experience of Paul and the other stories from the early church point out clearly that God intends for the fellowship of the Spirit to extend to a worldwide church and not just to the local church.

Their benevolence testified that they had not received the grace of God in vain. What could produce such liberality but the sanctification of the Spirit? In the eyes of believers and unbelievers it was a miracle of grace.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 344.2.

This liberality on the part of the believers [in Acts 2:44-45 and Acts 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.—*Ibid.** 70.3-71.1. [Content in brackets is added.]

32. So, what kinds of things can we do in our churches today to promote fellowship, joint worship, and generosity? Would there be times when it would be appropriate for us to try to promote fellowship with members of other church groups as well? What about non-Christian groups?
33. What beliefs, practices, and common values do you think were discussed earnestly among those first members who joined the church at Pentecost? What did they think had happened to them? Think of being one of the disciples of Jesus!
34. Read again Acts 2:42-47. Look at the list of activities that took place. This Christian fellowship led to an enormous increase in the membership of the church in and around

Jerusalem. This was certainly not just a matter of socializing with friends. What is the difference between Christian fellowship and socializing with friends? What obstacles prevent us from experiencing something like what happened in Jerusalem? What could we do in our Sabbath school classes or even as entire church families to improve Christian fellowship? Is the Holy Spirit still willing to work with us? On such occasions, do we need to invite the Holy Spirit into our lives?

35. Many churches find that there are reasons why they are not comfortable engaging in that kind of Christian fellowship. What things divide us in our churches today?
36. Protestants, especially in America, began to think about the prophecies in the Bible as a result of recognizing that some momentous things were happening, such as: (1) The Lisbon earthquake of 1755, (2) The dark day and the moon “turning to blood” in 1780, and (3) The pope being taken captive and dying in captivity in 1798. People around the world became interested in religious things. The British and Foreign Bible Society was founded. Bible translations were made into major languages so the gospel could be carried to new areas of the world. During that time, Christian groups became motivated to deal with social evils such as alcohol consumption and poverty. Church members found that cooperating and working alongside members of other churches gave them an opportunity to get to know them better and to share their beliefs. Could such a religious awakening take place in our day?
37. Remember that many of the disciples were fishermen from the Sea of Galilee. How did they support themselves in Jerusalem? There was no place to fish near Jerusalem! Were they supported by some of the money that was donated by people like Barnabas? What did the church do with the money which had been donated by Ananias and Sapphira? Did they go ahead and use it for the support of the organization? Remember that the Jewish leaders chose to use the 30 pieces of silver that Judas threw back at them to buy a field where they could bury foreigners.
38. One of the interesting comments describing those early church members was that they continually devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship. How would you describe that devotion? Many of them apparently devoted their lives entirely to the spreading of the gospel. Could that happen to some in our day? What kinds of devotion do we see among church members and even among people of the world in our day? Are these healthy examples of devotion? Who and what are the idols of the world in the 21st century?
39. One of the obvious results of their commitment and devotion was the bond of Christian fellowship that led to their contributing significant amounts of money through the apostles to support the cause. Was that the natural outworking of God’s love in their lives? In the book of Acts, Luke described their experiences as “full of joy.”
40. Does your personal Christian experience with your local church lead to joy and thanksgiving? Do you find tangible ways in which you can share some of your blessings with others? What factors keep us from doing that on a more regular and larger scale? We at Theological Crossroads share many practical religious handouts and recordings on Theox.org which are available for viewing and downloading.

© 2018, Kenneth Hart, MD, MA, MPH. Permission is hereby granted for any noncommercial use of these materials. Free distribution of all or of a portion of this material such as to a Bible study class is encouraged. *Electronic version. Info@theox.org

Last Modified: September 16, 2018

Z:\My Documents\WP\SSTG-Hart\Unity\SS-5-Unity-2018_11_03-Fin+.wpd