

lesson five

OCTOBER 27–NOVEMBER 2

The Experience of Unity in the Early **Church**

*“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine
and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers”*

(Acts 2:42, NKJV).



Through fasting, prayer, and communion, we must earnestly search and study the Bible as it points us to the truth.

Acts 2:44

Introduction

Being Together, Doing Together

It started with a direct question to me: “Where do you fellowship?” After a long conversation, we arranged for a face-to-face meeting in her church one Sabbath. Today, Abby is a great friend of mine. We meet quite often, share ideas, and participate in activities together. She introduced me to her friends, and I did the same for her. Meeting her opened a completely new world to me: the world of fellowship, the world of unity, the world of being together, and of doing together.

“As their joy increases, there is One in their midst whom they all recognize and cling to.”

James Stalker said, “Where two or three are met together, the prayers of one strikes fire from the soul of another; and the latter in his turn leads the way to nobler heights of devotion. And lo! As their joy increases, there is One in their midst whom they all recognize and cling to.”¹

The subject of fellowship is rampant in today’s Christian churches. It has led to the creation of fellowship halls, dinners, retreats. However, in many cases, the so-called fellowships do not reflect the true meaning of the word. According to Greek translations, the word *fellowship* implies “to hold something in common.” In other words, it means unity.

Unity of the church has been an important subject for both the early church and present-day Christians. The Bible takes us to the initial experiences of unity, when believers in Christ “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42, NKJV).

Therefore, fellowship is a means by which God accomplishes His will through the church. Believers need to know the meaning of true fellowship, why it is important, and how they can participate in it through their local churches. Going by the words of Stalker, fellowship denotes a relationship that involves more than one person. In fellowship, we develop an inner unity with Christ and show outward solidarity with our fellow believers. In fellowship, we contribute, we share, we participate.

The early church experienced unity through fellowship. We can do the same today. Christian fellowship is not necessarily about having dinners, watching or playing games, or participating in activities with other believers. These activities have their places—but only to the extent that they help accomplish God’s will. Christian fellowship is about doing God’s will together, which breeds church unity.

1. James Stalker, in “59 Quotes About Unity,” Christian Quotes, accessed November 2, 2017, <https://www.christianquotes.info/quotes-by-topic/quotes-about-unity/#axzz4ox6zIMe3>.

Logos

The Unity Recipe

Acts 1:12–14;
2:5–13, 42–47;
5:1–11

From the time of the apostles to our time, church unity has been at the core of every successful gospel dispensation. The experience of unity witnessed by the early believers indicates that unity is still a vital tool in promoting the gospel. Our lesson this week explains some of the focal issues that affected unity in the early church, issues that are relevant to us today.

When we allow God to use us, He can transform us and accomplish great things through us.

Days of Preparation (Acts 1:12–14)

Prayer was a key element in ensuring that Christian unity prevailed in the early church. Even before the descent of the Holy Spirit, believers remained in one accord, with prayer as one of the unifying factors. They prayed over their tribulations and over the dangers and challenges they faced in spreading the gospel after Christ ascended to heaven. Prayer dispels fear. It makes believers go through pain and affliction with confidence. On this particular day (Acts 1:12–14), the apostles and other believers gathered for a prayer and fellowship, waiting for the promise of the Holy Spirit to be fulfilled.

The Holy Spirit would be their teacher and guide and the informer of their decisions. From the prayer habits of the early church we can learn that when we unite in love and fervent prayer to perpetuate the cause of Christ, we are likely to receive His blessings.

From Babel to Pentecost (Acts 2:5–13)

The message of the descent of the Holy Spirit spread across Jerusalem, and the wonderful works performed by the apostles attracted multitudes of people. Some of them eventually became believers. It is easier for believers to receive the blessings of God when they unite and speak with one voice as one body of Christ. For the early believers, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit confirmed their unity in faith. Christ promised the disciples that He would provide the Holy Spirit to comfort believers in His absence (John 14:16, 17).

With the power of the Holy Spirit, the apostles were able to meet the demands of the gospel dispensation in their time. They were able to dispense the message of the death and resurrection of Christ to people of various backgrounds. Today's believers should learn from the influence of the Holy Spirit on the early believers. God works in ways the world cannot understand. From this passage, we can note how some people perceived the action of the Holy Spirit: "Others mocking said, These men are full of new wine" (Acts 2:13). When we allow God to use us, He can transform us and accomplish great things through us.

Living as Christians (Acts 2:42–47)

Fellowship was an important aspect of Christian unity in the early church. The Bible explains that the believers devoted themselves to “the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship” (Acts 2:42). The believers developed a new way of life in Christ. They joined the church after hearing the good news from the apostles.

Believers today can learn from the trend set by the early church. Fellowship is part of church unity. However, believers need to know that fellowship is not just socializing. The word *fellowship* implies a communion, a close mutual partnership between people who have a common agenda. For believers, the common bond is Jesus, whose teachings are in the Bible.

Fellowship involves ministering to one another according to the spiritual gifts we possess. It is a way of expressing love, acceptance, devotion, and caring and of ministering to fellow members as one body in Christ. How can we show fellowship in our local churches? Today, fellowship can show up in our activities in many instances. When we comfort those who hurt, offer personal counseling, participate in Bible studies, and encourage people who are downhearted, then we are involved with one another in a form of fellowship.

Generosity and Greed (Acts 5:1–11)

The story of Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, teaches believers about how God deals with sin, especially when believers become unfaithful. Ananias colluded with his wife to embezzle part of the funds that belonged to God’s work. Much as they thought the apostles would not know, Peter exposed the dishonesty that cost them their lives.

There is a raging battle between Satan and believers in which the prince of darkness attacks the church from within. This is also evident in Luke 22:3–6, when Judas, one of the disciples, betrayed Jesus. Many Christians are not able to resist the temptations that the enemy brings their way. However, it is possible to dispel the snares of the enemy if we emulate the principles of Christ (Luke 4:1–13).

As believers, we also have full responsibility over what we own. We need to develop a high level of integrity and honesty when dealing with our Creator. As usual, the devil is on the prowl (1 Pet. 5:8), and we should always be vigilant.

“But sin blinds us to the true nature of the offense: that our sin is against God. Sin also blinds us so that we choose short-term gains in this life, heedless of the long-term loss in the next (Lk 9:24-25).”¹

Dishonesty ruins church unity today just as it did the early church. If we are to remain true to Christ, honesty and integrity must form the foundation of our character. The message of dishonesty in Acts 5:1–11 speaks to Christians today. We must not allow selfish hypocrisy to ruin our Spirit-filled unity and fellowship.

REACT

1. How can we participate in true fellowship as believers in this generation?
2. How can we build and maintain honesty in small things?

1. “Negative Example: Ananias and Sapphira,” Bible Gateway, accessed August 9, 2017, <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Acts/Negative-Example-Ananias>.

Testimony

Unity in Diversity

Acts 2:5

The coming of the Holy Spirit upon believers was a significant experience. Ellen White, in *The Acts of the Apostles*, offers important insights to help us digest the concept.

“Christ’s ascension to heaven was the signal that His followers were to receive the promised blessing. For this they were to wait before they entered upon their work. When Christ passed within the heavenly gates, He was enthroned amidst the adoration of the angels. As soon as this ceremony was completed, the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples in rich currents, and Christ was indeed glorified, even with the glory which He had with the Father from all eternity.”¹

“The Holy Spirit did for them that which they could not have accomplished for themselves in a lifetime.”

“During the dispersion the Jews had been scattered to almost every part of the inhabited world, and in their exile they had learned to speak various languages. Many of these Jews were on this occasion in Jerusalem, attending the religious festivals then in progress. Every known tongue was represented by those assembled. This diversity of languages would have been a great hindrance to the proclamation of the gospel; God therefore in a miraculous manner supplied the deficiency of the apostles. The Holy Spirit did for them that which they could not have accomplished for themselves in a lifetime.”²

“Pentecost brought them the heavenly illumination. The truths they could not understand while Christ was with them were now unfolded. With a faith and assurance that they had never before known, they accepted the teachings of the Sacred Word. No longer was it a matter of faith with them that Christ was the Son of God. They knew that, although clothed with humanity, He was indeed the Messiah, and they told their experience to the world with a confidence which carried with it the conviction that God was with them.”³

REACT

1. What hindrances in spreading the gospel can we have if we don’t allow the Holy Spirit to work with us?
2. What did the early believers do differently after they received the Holy Spirit?

1. Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 38, 39.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 40.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 46.

Evidence *Resources for Church Unity*

By singing “May we dwell in unity,”¹ a line in the Kenya national anthem in English, the citizens get the inspiration that they are one, regardless of their individual differences. In the church, unity is equally important, which is why the early Christians showed unity with Christ and among themselves.

After the ascension of Christ, the subject of unity became more real for the apostles. The climax came on the Day of Pentecost when Christ unleashed the Holy Spirit upon them (Acts 2:1–13). Through steadfast fellowship and prayer, they experienced a sense of unity that allowed the Holy Spirit to enable them to perform miracles and wonders.

“May we dwell in unity.”

Some may think that church unity is impossible to achieve, given our diverse cultures, backgrounds, and different things that we enjoy. However, God has provided resources through which believers can accomplish and maintain church unity. These resources are mentioned in Paul's epistle to the Philippians, an early church that faced disunity (Phil. 2:1, NLT).

Encouragement in Christ. One of the things we have in common as believers is the encouragement we have from our relationship with Christ. We may go through various challenges in this world, but we have Christ by our side to comfort us through the pains and to encourage us through difficult times. As believers, we have the greatest promise from Christ: “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20, NIV).

The love of Christ. Once we accept Him as our Savior, we are assured of Christ's undivided love. The church cannot remain united if individual churches do not embrace the love of Christ. The love of Christ gave the early church the spirit to continue in fellowship and in prayer. In the absence of the love of Christ, fear sets in (1 John 4:18). We fear rejection; we fear losing our possessions or our lives. However, when we experience the love of Christ, we can surge on in unity, knowing that “if God be for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31).

Fellowship with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came upon the early church on the Day of Pentecost. He directed their actions and enabled them to understand one another even though they came from different backgrounds. Christians today receive the Holy Spirit at baptism. Paul writes, “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free” (1 Cor. 12:13, NIV). With the Holy Spirit in our midst, we are one body in Christ, with spiritual gifts that we use to glorify Him and to edify one another.

1. “The Kenya National Anthem,” Kenya-Advisor.com, accessed August 6, 2017, <http://www.kenya-advisor.com/kenya-national-anthem.html>.

How-to *Keeping Disunity at Bay*

Acts 5:1, 2

Nearly every church today suffers from the sickness of disunity. It is common to see churches split into factions, fighting among members, and a divided leadership. However, for every sickness, there is a preventive measure, so we need not wait until we are deep in problems to find a solution.

Before we dwell much on the subject of disunity in our local churches, it is important to understand that the virus of disunity has evolved over a long time. Disunity existed in the early church just as it exists today.

It is also important to note that church unity begins to wane when members fail to seek guidance from God. Unity does not mean uniformity. We

Unity does not mean uniformity.

don't have to be of the same race, tribe, or educational standard to maintain unity. We may have divided opinions on different issues, but if we seek guidance from the Holy Spirit, we can use the rainbow of our diversity to arrive at the best answers.

Church unity was an important ingredient in the early church. It was one of the ingredients that helped propel the gospel after the ascension of Christ. To the church in Ephesus, Paul emphasized the importance of unity in Christ and encouraged Christians there to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

In our churches today, we can keep away the virus of disunity by implementing the following steps:

Embrace prayer and Scripture. Where two or more people are involved, divergent views are bound to arise. However, where the Spirit leads, you are more likely to make the right decision.

Respect opinions of others. Every person is entitled to his or her opinion. With that in mind, we should not lose focus on God's guidance in every discussion.

Be positive. Being optimistic helps us contribute positively to arising matters. If we are yearning for change, we should be part of that change we would like to see. Avoid gossip—talk to people.

Respect church leadership. Support church leadership for the advancement of the mission of the church. Stop comparing your church to other churches. Focus on what you can do to improve the situation.

REACT

What else do you think could help eliminate church disunity?

Alphonse Mwaka, Nairobi, Kenya

Acts 4:32

Opinion*Generosity—an Ingredient for Church Unity*

To guard the unity of the church, believers should share joyfully the resources that God gives them. An act of generosity among believers is recorded in Acts 4:32–37, when the believers sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with members who lacked. They used their possessions to meet the temporal and financial needs of the church.

Generosity is one way to achieve that unity.

One of the characteristics of a healthy believer is to give generously and joyously. “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7, NIV) is one of the best principles of generosity. The word *cheerful* is an adjective, with synonyms such as happy, buoyant, enthusiastic, or upbeat. God wants us to give joyfully, with love. However, how do you and I become joyful givers? “God’s economy has always been around and it will exist long after this world’s economies have been forgotten. God’s economy is never subject to a bull or a bear market; it’s always up!”¹

In our local churches, we have members with various financial needs. The entire church body needs financial assistance from time to time, to help propel mission and activities. How can we cheerfully give toward these causes? It is upon us to see that we move together as one body of Christ, regardless of our differences. Generosity is one way to achieve that unity. It worked for the early church, and it’s possible for us to achieve the same results.

“Not only does generosity reduce stress, support one’s physical health, enhance one’s sense of purpose, and naturally fight depression, it is also shown to increase one’s lifespan.”² All the same, there is a lot more to generosity in the spiritual perspective. As believers, we should know that God has put us in charge as managers of His wealth.

Everything we possess, including money, belongs to God (Ps. 24:1; Hag. 2:8). God has given us the opportunity to be vessels through which His wealth flows from one cause to another. When we learn the art of giving back to God, He gives us more (Luke 6:38; 1 Sam. 2:30).

REACT

What are some of the financial and temporal needs that you should address in your church?

1. David O. Dykes, “The Beauty of Unity and Generosity,” part 3, Ten Habits of Healthy Believers, January 17, 2016, <http://www.gabc.org/wp-content/uploads/s011716.pdf>.

2. Lisa Firestone, “The Benefits of Generosity,” *Huffpost*, June 13, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lisa-firestone/the-benefits-of-generosit_b_5448218.html.

Exploration

The Unity Factor

Eph. 1:13

CONCLUDE

When Christians unite for a noble cause, it is a good unity. The oneness that early believers experienced is possible for us today. However, for a Spirit-filled unity to take place among us, we need to welcome the Holy Spirit to guide us in our communion with Christ and with one another. The ultimate aim of Christian unity is to glorify the name of Christ with the actions, gifts, and resources we have at our disposal.

CONSIDER

- Listing some of the things that distract us from achieving unity as Adventists and then writing some of the ways in which we could avoid such distractions.
- Memorizing Acts 2:42 and using it as the default opening verse whenever you fellowship with your fellow believers. Share experiences with them about the benefits of being united as one body in Christ.
- Writing a poem entitled “Christian Fellowship.” Think of the lines you can include in the poem to make it relevant to your church or community. Recite the poem at home and in church on Sabbath.
- Creating a fellowship group on a social media platform such as Facebook or Whatsapp. Recruit as many members as possible and share your personal experiences on how you can solidify your relationship with Christ.
- Composing a song for unity in your church. Sing it along with members during prayer meetings or on Sabbath.
- Creating a support box for the less fortunate people in your church. Collect shoes, clothes, funds, and other materials to distribute to the members. Share the satisfaction and fulfillment you derive from the project with members of your Sabbath School class.
- Collecting information from various people on their definition of fellowship. Note the differences or similarities to the description of *fellowship* in Acts 2:42.

CONNECT

Psalms 133:1; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Galatians 3:26–28.

Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, chapter 13, “Days of Preparation”; chapter 4, “Pentecost.”

Charles Ochieng', Nairobi, Kenya