

Lesson 9: Fellowship

Introduction Bobby lived with his family in Holland. He was still a child when his parents became Adventists. But he wasn't happy about it. Bobby hated going to church. He would much rather spend his Saturdays playing soccer with his friends. Of course, he had other reasons. He didn't like the church because they met in the basement of an old bicycle repair shop in a part of the city that had a bad reputation. What would his friends say if they found out where he went to church? Bobby was sure that they would laugh at him! The basement church was a constant embarrassment for him! Quite often, when Bobby went with his friends to the large cathedrals on Sundays they would ask him, "Bobby, where do you go to church?" Feeling ashamed, Bobby typically ignored the question. Then the unimaginable happened. School was closed on Sabbath and Bobby's friends wanted to go to church with him. Suddenly Bobby didn't know what to do because he didn't want his friends to see the shabby church in the basement.

But then everything changed. On May 10, 1940 Hitler's troops attacked Holland. There was shooting in the streets and soldiers everywhere. The next day was Sabbath. On Sabbath morning his mother started to dress the children. Bobby's father asked her, "What are you doing? We are in a war. We aren't going to church today." But his mother answered, "Today is a day of fellowship." The discussion was over and they went to church. When they arrived the others were already waiting. Machine guns and bombs couldn't stop them. The church members greeted each other affectionately, "Even if everything sinks in chaos we still have each other." From that point on Bobby was proud to be a member of the basement church.

It was a difficult time filled with starvation and oppression. But the church members stuck together during their hardships. As long as one of them had some flour or milk, they all had something to eat. Their lives depended on their fellowship. Unfortunately, the church members were not immune to the suffering caused by the Germans. Some, like the church deacon who lost his son and his house, died in the bombings. One Sabbath they gathered again for church. They were just about to start when they heard the sound of boots. A German soldier came down the stairs. The deacon, who had lost his son and house, went towards him and yelled, "Get out! Can't you at least leave us alone here?" The soldier answered, "But I am a brother. I want to worship God." These words changed everything! The deacon took his hand and said, "If you have come to worship God then you are my brother." This was the fellowship that Bobby experienced. At first he thought he would lose his friends when they found out where he went to church. But it turned out quite different. On Wednesday afternoons the boys didn't have any school, so they went to the city and to the harbor to look at the big ships. During these excursions they would often get thirsty or need a restroom. One day, they asked Bobby, "Don't you have an aunt or uncle living nearby?" Bobby didn't have any relatives living in the city, but there were church members whom his parents called brothers and sisters. He guessed that made them his aunts and uncles! "Oh yes, Aunt Emma lives nearby." And so they went to her house. She greeted them warmly. "Bobby, it's so nice that you came." Bobby said, "I brought a few friends along." And she answered, "Bobby, your friends are my friends."

Bobby was so proud of his church. But how did he know where all his "aunts and uncles" lived? Quite simply, the church members often visited each other. They ate

Paul and Fellowship

A few years after the birth of the church at Pentecost, Jesus appeared to the Christian persecutor Saul, revealed Himself to him, and called him to be a missionary to the Gentiles. When we study his ministry and the letters he wrote to the churches that he had founded, we clearly see that he too followed the fellowship-oriented church model established by Jesus. For one thing Paul almost always worked in a team of three (e.g., Paul with Barnabas and Mark, or with Silas and Timothy.) Sometimes there were more co-workers with him (e.g., Luke, Titus, Erastus, Priscilla and Aquila.) Thereby Paul followed Jesus' example, who also worked in a team.

When Paul founded a church, it was usually in a house where the development and support of genuine fellowship would come more naturally and easily.



Read the following texts from Paul's letters and jot down the references to house churches.

Romans 16:3-5: _____

1 Corinthians 16:19: _____

Colossians 4:15: _____

Philemon 1-2: _____

The Church as the Body of Christ

In his letters Paul emphasized again and again the necessity and type of fellowship that was needed. Paul spoke emphatically about fellowship in 1 Corinthians because the church in Corinth was having problems with it. In this letter Paul describes the church as the body of Christ, a body with different members working harmoniously together and with Christ at the head. Just as the members can't live independently from the head, in the same way they can't get along without the other members. This thought is the heart of Paul's theology on fellowship. Every believer is baptized into this body. It wasn't possible to be baptized without becoming part of this fellowship. For Paul the most important thing wasn't church membership. It was genuine fellowship based on mutual dependence and care for one another.

"One Another" Texts

It was characteristic of Paul, and other New Testament writers, to use the so called "one another" texts.

- "...that the members should have the same care for one another." (1 Corinthians 12:25)
- "Therefore comfort each other and edify one another..." (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- "As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another..." (1 Peter 4:10)
- "Bear one another's burdens..." (Galatians 6:2)
- "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works." (Hebrews 10:24)
- "But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another..." (1 John 1:7)
- "For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." (1 John 3:11)
- "Beloved, let us love one another..." (1 John 4:7)

These statements can only be understood and implemented in the context of genuine, deep relationships. How can we care for others when we only know them superficially? Or, how can we bear someone's burden when we know nothing about it? How can we encourage, admonish, or love someone without fellowship? It would be impossible!

Fellowship in History

In its first 300 years, in spite of harsh resistance and persecution, Christianity spread through the whole Roman Empire and into distant lands. For the most part, the believers didn't have any church buildings and met in houses. One of their greatest strengths was their close fellowship! This changed though during the reign of Constantine, who institutionalized the church and made it the state religion. During this period, large churches were built for worship services and the purity of the Gospel message was lost, as well as the fellowship that had nourished the believers. In the Middle Ages it was only groups like the Waldensians, or the Anabaptists, who maintained fellowship according to the early Christian example.

In the 18th century, John Wesley founded the Methodist Church, which spread across England and North America. When Wesley preached, he gathered the converts in small groups known as Methodist classes. These groups consisted of 10-12 people, who didn't live far from each other. They met weekly and talked very openly about their faith, their temptations, and their victories. These believers experienced strong spiritual growth due to these small open groups. In the days of Wesley no one could be a Methodist without being part of such a group. It was taken for granted. Later, when the Methodists gave up this principle, they lost their spiritual power and became a "normal" church.

Fellowship in Adventist History

Ellen White came from the Methodist church and knew the value of Christian fellowship. So it isn't surprising that the early Adventists highly valued fellowship. They seldom heard sermons during the church service. Instead they had fellowship meetings and social meetings in which they shared with each other what was going on in their lives and encouraged each other in faith. These prayer and fellowship meetings often took place outside the regular church services. These meetings were so important for the early Adventists that they considered it their duty to regularly attend them. These meetings differed from place to place, but the common denominator was prayer, testimonies, mutual encouragement or admonition, and singing. The goal of these fellowship meetings wasn't Bible study (they did that in

Sabbath School), it was to nurture relationships. They had more to do with the heart than the head and contributed more to the spiritual life of the church than the sermons did. Once James White lamented that the church members missed so many blessings because they depended on the sermons rather than the fellowship meetings to nurture their spiritual lives. He wrote:

“The church at Battle creek needs these preachers less than any church in the State, from the fact that it has more active members than any other church in the State, many of them of long experience and sound judgment. We sometimes preach to them, but often feel when done that a social meeting would have been better. And it is frequently the case that, when we return from spending a Sabbath with some other church, we are told that the brethren enjoyed an excellent meeting, the best in several Sabbaths. Now what is the use for us preachers to get in the way of these experienced, living members?” (*Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, July 22, 1862*)

It 's true! These fellowship meetings with testimonies, prayer, singing, and words of mutual encouragement served their spiritual lives more than the sermons from the best ministers. This close Christian fellowship was a distinguishing feature of the early Adventists and was one of their greatest strengths. Ellen White wrote about these fellowship meetings:

Quote #1

“We meet together to edify one another by an interchange of thoughts and feelings, to gather strength, and light, and courage by becoming acquainted with one another’s hopes and aspirations; and by our earnest, heartfelt prayers, offered up in faith, we receive refreshment and vigor from the Source of our strength. These meetings should be most precious seasons and should be made interesting to all who have any relish for religious things.... All have not the same experience in their religious life. But those of diverse exercises come together and with simplicity and humbleness of mind talk out their experience. All who are pursuing the onward Christian course should have, and will have, an experience that is living, that is new and interesting. A living experience is made up of daily trials, conflicts, and temptations, strong efforts and victories, and great peace and joy gained through Jesus. A simple relation of such experiences gives light, strength, and knowledge that will aid others in their advancement in the divine life.” (*Testimonies to the Church, vol. 2, p. 579-580*)

Quote #2

“We sustain a loss when we neglect the privilege of associating together to strengthen and encourage one another in the service of God. The truths of His word lose their vividness and importance in our minds. Our hearts cease to be enlightened and aroused by their sanctifying influence, and we decline in spirituality. In our association as Christians we lose much by lack of sympathy with one another. He who shuts himself up to himself is not filling the position that God designed he should. The proper cultivation of the social elements in our nature brings us into sympathy with others and is a means of development and strength to us in the service of God. If Christians would associate together, speaking to each other of the love of God and of the precious truths of redemption, their own hearts would be refreshed and they would refresh one another. We may be daily learning more of our heavenly Father, gaining a fresh experience of His grace; then we shall desire to speak of His love; and as we do this, our own hearts will be warmed and encouraged. If we thought and talked more of Jesus, and less of self, we should have far more of His presence. “ (*Steps to Christ, p. 101*)

Quote #3

“As a people, we lose much by lack of sympathy and sociability with one another. He who talks of independence and shuts himself up to himself is not filling the position that God designed he should. We are children of God, mutually dependent upon one another for happiness. The claims of God and of humanity are upon us. We must all act our part in this life. It is the proper cultivation of the social elements of our nature that brings us into sympathy with our brethren and affords us happiness in our efforts to bless others. The happiness of heaven will consist in the pure communion of holy beings, the harmonious social life with the blessed angels and with the redeemed who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. We cannot be happy while we are wrapped up in our interest for ourselves. We should live in this world to win souls to the Saviour. If we injure others, we injure ourselves also. If we bless others, we also bless ourselves; for the influence of every good deed is reflected upon our own hearts.” (*Testimonies to the Church, vol. 4, p. 72-73*)

Heirs of the Reformation

As Adventists we understand ourselves to be the heirs of the reformation. We know we have been called to continue the work of the reformation. This work isn't only preaching the right message, but exemplifying real Christianity in our lives. The last church should mirror the life and the message of the early Christian church. Jesus said: “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” The last generation will prepare itself for the second coming and point others toward Jesus through fellowship.

