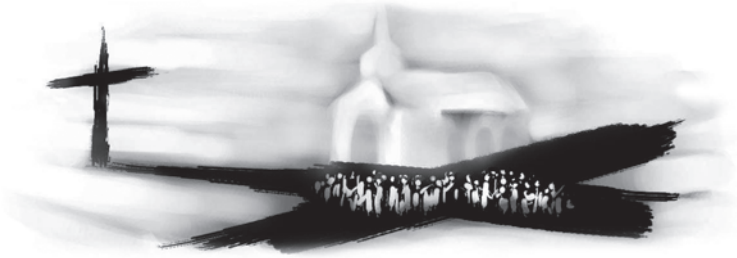


Community



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 11:1–4, 12:1–3, 1 Cor. 12:12–27, Eph. 4:1–13, Rev. 22:1–6.*

Memory Text: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (*1 Corinthians 12:27, NIV*).

Humans are social beings. God could have created a hundred million perfect human beings as “stand alones” who would each pursue his or her own independent goals. Instead, He first created one male and one female and stated that it would not be good for man to be alone. The first couple was to complement each other. And they were to multiply and create a community of family members and eventually larger social units.

One of the most important social units to which people can belong is their church. Unfortunately, many people no longer recognize the social benefits of church membership. Of course, the church is more than a club for men and women who happen to share a certain interest. The church is a community of believers who share in the ultimate experience of salvation and recognize Christ as their Lord.

The Week at a Glance: *Believing and belonging are closely linked. God wants us to be part of the community that He has initiated. It is a privilege to belong to that community, but it also carries responsibilities. We all have our unique contribution to make to the body of Christ.*

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 20.*

God Wants a People

In Genesis 11 we find the record of an experiment in community building that did not meet with God's approval. When, after the worldwide Flood, the descendants of the original survivors decided to stick together and build a city with a huge tower in the southern part of what is now Iraq, God was extremely displeased. This was not what God had intended. Yet, in the following chapter—Genesis 12—the idea of community building is once again brought into focus, but now in a very positive sense. God told Abraham (who at that time was still called Abram) that He wanted to form a people whom He would call His own.

What was the major difference between the Tower of Babel initiative at community building and God's plan to make Abraham and his posterity into His people? *Compare Gen. 11:1–4 with Gen. 12:1–3.*

From the story of the calling of Abraham onward, the Old Testament centers on the experiences of the people of God, their failures and their triumphs. The people of Israel had the mission of making their covenant-God known to all other nations. They were to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. We know how, as a people, Israel failed to accomplish its task. When the Messiah came, He was rejected and killed as a criminal by certain leaders who should have welcomed Him as their Redeemer. At the same time, many remained faithful to the Lord and formed the nucleus of what was to become the Christian church.

Read 1 Peter 2:9, 10. What's the message to us today?

God's New Testament people consist of Jews and Gentiles, of men and women from every nation, tribe, and linguistic group. Like Israel in Old Testament times, they now have the responsibility of teaching others about divine grace. Like Israel of old, they, too, belong to a special community of believers.

What parallels can you draw between ancient Israel and the church of today? What lessons should we learn from them? What mistakes should we avoid?

The Privilege of Belonging

Laurence J. Peter, an American educator and author, once said, “Going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than going to the garage makes you a car!” Truly *belonging* to Christ’s church is more than having one’s name on the church’s record book. It implies a realization of what the church is and of one’s own role in the church.

In numerous places Paul refers to fellow believers as *saints* (*Eph. 1:1, Phil. 1:1, Col. 1:2*). This word has today acquired a meaning that it did not have in Bible times. Saints are not perfect or holy people; they certainly are not people who have been declared to be “saints” after a long and complex ecclesiastical procedure long after they die. “For Paul [and for other Bible writers], the term saint had none of the stained-glass window connotations that it has for us. A saint was not some ancient, larger-than-life, perfect Christian, but anyone called and set apart by God who became part of the community of faith.” —John C. Brunt, *Romans*, The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1996), p. 42.

What major role is given to those who belong to the church—the “body of Christ”? How should each “saint” relate to all others?
1 Cor. 12:12–27.

A church member is not to be reduced to a statistic. Every member of the church has a unique role to play and a particular contribution to make. No one can be missed without causing at least a measure of dysfunction of the body. At the same time, no member can claim that his or her contribution is far superior to that of someone else. The metaphor of the body with its many members sublimely illustrates this truth. Some parts appear to be more vital than others. The heart, the brain, the lungs, and the stomach may seem among the most prominent parts, but the functioning or malfunctioning of some minor gland often also proves to be a matter of life and death.

How do you fit in with your local body? Are you content with the role you play? Are you jealous of someone else’s role? Are you a dead, lifeless organ? Or maybe you are trying to take on more than you need? How can Paul’s words help you better understand what your role should be?

The Responsibility of Belonging

Belonging to the body of Christ is a great privilege. Another figure of speech underlines this great truth: We all are part of God’s family. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” (1 John 3:1, NIV). But privileges always are accompanied by responsibilities.

What does the image of the church as the body of Christ, and of each of us being members of that body, imply as far as our personal responsibilities are concerned? *Eph. 4:1–13.*

“All must move like parts of a well-adjusted machinery, each part dependent on the other part, yet standing distinct in action. And each one is to take the place assigned him and do the work appointed him. God calls upon the members of His church to receive the Holy Spirit, to come together in unity and brotherly sympathy, to bind their interests together in love.”—Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, p. 276.

What are some other key responsibilities for all church members? *1 Cor. 16:2; 1 Thess. 5:14, 17, 25; Heb. 10:25; 1 Pet. 3:15.*

Many people live in consumer societies and, as a result, tend to bring this consumer mentality into their church. The first question often is, *What is in it for me?* rather than, *How can I contribute with my talents and gifts?* When John F. Kennedy was inaugurated in 1961 as president of the United States, he spoke these immortal words: “‘Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.’” These words also are applicable to our attitude toward the church. Even though the church can and does do a lot for those who faithfully attend and join in its many activities, we should first of all constantly ask ourselves, How can I serve better? How can I encourage others? How can I be a role model for our youth? How can I contribute to making my local church into a spiritual home in which many can find the inner peace and nurture they need?

Ask yourself these questions and honestly look at your answers: What is my main motive for going to church? What I can get, or what I can give?

Unity in Diversity

Many Christians strive for greater unity among the many denominations. They speak of the “scandal” of division and disunity and remind us that Christ repeatedly called for unity among His followers. Unity also is a key theme for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which is threatened by fragmentation and polarization from within. But the unity Adventists seek cannot be reduced to mere organizational unity or uniformity in worship styles and other traditions. It must go much deeper.

What are key qualifications for true Christian unity? *John 14:6; Eph. 4:3, 13.*

To be united in Christ means to be united in the truth. Christ defined Himself as the Truth. That is not to say that there cannot be true unity between people who differ with regard to certain theological views or in the interpretation of certain passages. But true unity does require a common commitment to the Scriptures as the Word of God and to its fundamental teachings, and a common desire to practice what the Word teaches. It does not require, however, that all members think alike and worship in exactly the same way. It does not annul the wonderful cultural diversity that so much enriches our worldwide church community.

How does the description of the New Jerusalem illustrate the rich diversity that characterizes God’s people? *Revelation 21 and 22:1–6; in particular, 21:12–14, 19, 26, and 22:2.*

The New Jerusalem refers to something concrete and real that God creates for His people, even if the description is highly symbolic. What strikes us as we read it is the emphasis on diversity. No wonder, because the redeemed will come from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (*Rev. 5:9, NIV; cf. Rev. 7:9*).

The peoples who will enter the gates of the New Jerusalem and will populate the new earth are like the many branches that issue from the same vine. “In the branches of a vine there is diversity, and yet in this diversity there is unity. Every branch is united to the parent stalk. Every branch draws its nourishment from the same source. When we are branches of the true Vine, there will be no quarreling among us, no strife for the supremacy, no disparaging of one another.”—Ellen G. White, *General Conference Bulletin*, April 25, 1901.

If there is to be such diversity in heaven, why is there ethnic strife in our churches today? Why do we tend to want to congregate with those of our own ilk as opposed to others? What kind of message are we sending by doing this?

The Church's Foundation: Jesus Christ

We often speak of our church. We have many reasons to be proud of our church. On the other hand, we realize that our church is not perfect. We have invested a lot of ourselves, of our talents, time, energy, and money in the church and have good reasons to have a clear sense of ownership. However, in the final analysis, the church is not ours. It is God's. And that makes a decisive difference.

What did Christ Himself state in answer to the question about to whom the church belongs? *Matt. 16:18.*

The statement by Christ about the rock upon which God's church was to be built has been grossly misunderstood by many. When the full context and all other biblical evidence is taken into consideration, there is no ground for suggesting that Peter was the rock upon whom the church was founded and that special authority was transferred from him to the future bishops of Rome. Peter's confession of Christ as the Son of the living God (*Matt. 16:16*) was the rock upon which God founded His church.

Consider the meaning of some other symbols used to underline the same truth, that is, that the church is built on Jesus Christ and that it is His church rather than ours. *Eph. 2:20; 4:15, 16; Rev. 1:12–16, 20.*

Like so many passages in the book of Revelation, the description of Jesus Christ in 1:12–20 is full of Old Testament imagery. Christ is presented as walking in the midst of seven lampstands, clothed as the High Priest. Our mind automatically goes back to the symbol of the lampstand in the ancient tabernacle that proclaimed God's presence among His people. Before the book of Revelation goes into detail about "what must soon take place" (*1:1, NIV*), it makes sure that we see everything from the right perspective. It is the revelation of Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, our heavenly High Priest, who is not some distant, static deity but the One who walks in the midst of His church.

If, ultimately, the church belongs to God, what is our role in it? Are we, then, not stewards of it? What kind of responsibilities does this place on us? How well are you living up to this responsibility? What can you do better?

Further Study: For a thorough Adventist study on the nature of the church, see R. Dederen, ed., *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 2000), pp. 538–581. See also chapter 45 of Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 410–418.

“Jesus answered Peter, saying, ‘Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven’ [Matt. 16:17, KJV].

“The truth which Peter had confessed is the foundation of the believer’s faith. It is that which Christ Himself has declared to be eternal life. But the possession of this knowledge was no ground for self-glorification. Through no wisdom or goodness of his own had it been revealed to Peter. Never can humanity, of itself, attain to a knowledge of the divine. ‘It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know?’ Job 11:8. Only the spirit of adoption can reveal to us the deep things of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 412.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Is church membership a necessary condition for salvation? Or do we join the church for other reasons? If so, what are they? What great advantages do we have being part of a body? At the same time, what things must we be careful of and watch out for?
- ❷ Some people say, “I have stopped going to church. When I attended, it left me empty. When I go out in nature, I have a deeper religious experience than when I listen to an uninteresting sermon.” What would you reply to such a person?
- ❸ Dwell more on the questions raised in Wednesday’s lesson regarding ethnic diversity in our church. Why, of all people, should Christians be the most accepting and loving of others, regardless of ethnic differences? What could be done to help us better live up to what we know the Lord would have us do regarding the important question of racial and ethnic harmony?

Summary: The church is a divine initiative. It is God’s church rather than our church. We are members of the body of Christ—each of us with our own distinct function—but must always remember that He is the Head. We are not called to uniformity but must do all we can to maintain true unity in Christ.

Onward Christian Soldiers

by PAUL CLEE

Tomas Repsys was an officer in the Lithuanian military when he met the Savior a few years ago. He was touched by the warm fellowship and Bible teachings of the Adventist Church and felt God urging him to share his faith with fellow soldiers. But he was unsure how to go about it.

Repsys studied the Bible and other Christian literature to ground himself in his faith so that he could answer questions others might ask. But he found that few people wanted to hear about God. He prayed for wisdom and for direction regarding those with whom to share his faith.

After much prayer Repsys was assigned to work in the military headquarters, a position he knows that God provided so that he could minister to those with whom he came in contact.

He learned of a Christian organization called ECHOS (European Christians Home Organization for Soldiers) that had just been established. Its goals were similar to his own, and he joined their group. He began inviting soldiers to lectures on subjects ranging from home and family to personal health and Christian principles. This opened the door to invite soldiers to Bible studies, as well.

Leaders of ECHOS provided multimedia equipment, Christian books, Bibles, and a lot of moral support to Repsys as he ministered to those who came. For moral support he invited church members as well as fellow soldiers he knew well. And he shared the lecture series with pastors, laypeople, and a few fellow soldiers.

Besides holding lectures and weekly Bible studies, the ECHOS group organizes outings every second month for the soldiers. They visit historic locations or places of natural beauty. During the outing Repsys or one of the other Christian soldiers gives a short worship. As many as 25 soldiers attend the meetings or go on the outings.

This outreach provides opportunities to identify soldiers who are open to spiritual things. Repsys has invited soldiers to his home to talk about God on a deeper level.

Military service is short in Lithuania, but through the efforts of Tomas Repsys and fellow Christians, they are making this time count for Christ in the lives of young soldiers who often are away from home for the first time.

Lithuania was once part of the Soviet Union. Today about one thousand Seventh-day Adventist believers—or 1 person in every 3,400 Lithuanians—worship in 17 churches. Our mission offerings support various outreach programs in Lithuania and around the world. Thank you for giving.

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