

Families of Faith



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 10:1–28, 34, 35; 1 Cor. 2:2; 1 Thess. 5:21, 22; John 1:12, 13; 3:7; 1 John 5:1.*

Memory Text: “Therefore . . . let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (*Hebrews 12:1, 2, NKJV*).

No matter what stage of life we are in, or what we have been through or will face down the road, we exist against the background of culture. Our parents, our children, our homes, our families, even our church—all are impacted by the culture in which they exist, and greatly, too. Though other factors were at play, the change of the Sabbath to Sunday was a powerful example of how the culture of the time, powerfully and negatively, influenced the church. Every time we drive by a church and see a sign for Sunday services, we are given a stark reminder of just how far-reaching the power of culture can be.

Christian families confront cultural challenges all the time. Sometimes the cultural influences can be good; most times, though, the influence is negative.

The great news is that the power of the gospel gives us light, comfort, and strength to deal with the challenges that culture can bring. This week we will look at how we can be “families of faith” as we seek to “become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (*Phil. 2:15, NKJV*).

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 15.

“Hold Fast What Is Good”

As the gospel circles the globe, Christians encounter different cultures and practices, many of which pertain to family and social relationships. One of the great questions for Christian missionaries is in regard to how they should relate to various cultural norms about many things, including family relationships they might personally find uncomfortable.

Read Acts 10:1–28, 34, 35. What can we learn here about our need to overcome our own barriers and prejudices when dealing with other cultures?

Christ’s death was for the sins of every human being everywhere. Many people simply do not know this great truth yet. To bring this news with an invitation to respond is the evangelistic mission of Christians. Because God shows no partiality, Christians are called to treat everyone with respect and integrity, giving them a chance to embrace the good news that is for them, as well.

What conclusions did early Christian missionaries reach regarding the presentation of the gospel to other cultures? What principle can we draw from these texts? Acts 15:19, 20, 28, 29; 1 Cor. 2:2; 1 Thess. 5:21, 22.

Though every culture mirrors the fallen condition of the people within it, cultures also may have beliefs that are compatible with Scripture, even useful to the cause of the gospel. The value placed upon close relationships in family and community in many parts of the world is an example. Christians can uphold and strengthen that which is good and in keeping with biblical principles.

At the same time, God’s truth must not be compromised. Church history sadly shows that compromise and accommodation to cultures has yielded a patchwork of pseudo-Christian beliefs posing as authentic Christianity. Satan claims to be the god of this world and happily spreads confusion, but Jesus has redeemed this world, and His Spirit guides His followers into all truth (*John 16:13*).

How much of your faith is shaped by your culture, and how much is biblical truth? How can you learn to discern between the two? Be prepared to discuss your answer in class.

The Power of Culture on Family

“For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him” (Gen. 18:19).

Though they might come in various configurations, families are the building blocks of society; thus, many distinct cultural traits of various societies are directly tied to family. For instance, in one ancient culture it was deemed a man’s responsibility to eat the corpses of his dead parents; in another, a man who wanted a bride had to bring her father a dowry of shrunken heads from a rival tribe. Even in modern times, ideas relating to children, courtship, divorce, marriage, parents, and so forth vary widely. As we spread our message to these various cultures, we have to learn how to relate to them in ways that, while not compromising our beliefs, don’t cause unnecessary problems. At the same time, and closer to home, we have to be very aware of just what cultural influences impact our families.

In what ways did culture impact family life in the following examples? What principles can we learn from these examples?

Gen. 16:1–3 _____

Gen. 35:1–4 _____

Ezra 10 _____

1 Kings 11:1 _____

None of us live in a vacuum; all of us and our families are impacted by the culture in which we live. Our responsibility as Christians is to exist within our culture the best we can, keeping that which is in harmony with our faith, while shunning, as much as possible, that which conflicts with it.

What things in your particular culture are helpful to family life and in harmony with the Bible? What things are not? How can you best adapt your faith to your culture without compromising essential truths?

Sustaining Families Through Seasons of Change

Change is an inescapable, unsettling occurrence in families, regardless of whatever culture they live in. Some change is related to predictable passage through the life cycle. Often change is unpredictable, such as deaths, disasters, war, illnesses, family moves, or career failures. Many families face economic and social changes in their communities and countries. Other changes are directly related to the culture.

Below are some examples of great, even traumatic, changes people faced. Using your imagination, put yourself in their positions. How did these changes impact their family life? What mechanism would you have to help cope? In what ways might you have reacted differently?

• **Abraham, Sarah, and Lot** (*Gen. 12:1–5*) _____

• **Hadassah** (*Esther 2:7–9*) _____

• **Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah** (*Daniel 1*) _____

With change comes the experience of loss and the anxiety of uncertainty as to one's immediate future. Depending on a family's ability to adjust to changes, these experiences can propel people to new levels of growth and appreciation for spiritual things, or they can lead to stress and anxiety. Satan exploits the disruption changes bring, hoping to introduce doubt and distrust in God. The promises of God's Word, the resources of family and friends, and the assurance that their lives were in God's hands helped many heroes and heroines of faith cope successfully with momentous life upheaval.

If you know someone (or even a whole family) who is facing a traumatic change, do something in a practical way to give them some help and encouragement.

Toward a First-Generation Faith

What crisis of faith developed in Israel after Joshua and his peers died? *Judg. 2:7–13.*

Studies of how values and beliefs in organizations such as churches are transmitted to subsequent generations show that the founders have very high levels of commitment to the beliefs. They were the ones who first championed them. Within a generation or two, many lose sight of the principles behind the values. They may go along with the organization—but often from habit. In subsequent generations, habits tend to crystallize into traditions. The founders' passion is no longer present.

It has been said that God has no grandchildren, only children. What do you think that means? *See also John 1:12, 13; 3:7; 1 John 5:1.*

A common approach to transmitting values through long generations of Christianity has been for older ones simply to tell the youth what they believe. Learning what one's parents believe or what the church believes is not personal faith however. Being a Christian is more than belonging to an organization with a history and a dogma. True faith isn't something genetic, isn't something that is passed on naturally from one generation to another. Each one needs to know Christ for himself or herself. Parents can do only so much. The church as a whole, and parents in particular, need to do all they can to create an environment that will make young people want to make that right choice, but, in the end, a generation is saved or lost for the gospel one person at a time.

Joe, coming out of atheism, joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church as an adult after a powerful conversion experience. He married an Adventist woman and had a few children, whom they, of course, raised in the faith. One day, thinking about the spiritual condition of his children, he said, "Oh, if only my children would have the experience that I had!" If you had been there, what would you have said to him?

Twenty-First-Century Runners

In his popular Bible paraphrase *The Message*, Eugene Peterson uses “message” wherever the biblical word for “gospel” appears. The good news about Jesus is truly *the message* still needed by the world today. Christian families are called to experience it together and to share it in whatever culture they live.

How would you summarize “the message” using the following texts?

Matt. 28:5–7; John 3:16; Rom. 1:16, 17; 1 Cor. 2:2; 2 Cor. 5:18–21.

The earliest news the disciples ran everywhere with was of the resurrection of Jesus. Christian families today join a long line of runners proclaiming, “He is risen,” as He said (*Matt. 28:7, NKJV*). The reality of His resurrection makes credible everything else Jesus said about Himself, about God and His love for sinners, about forgiveness, and about the assurance of eternal life by faith in Him.

Passionate about the gospel. Scripture gives glimpses of the gospel’s sweeping effect on the lives of Jesus’ early followers. They opened their homes for Bible study; they prayed and ate together, shared money and resources, and took care of each other. Whole households embraced the message. Were they suddenly flawless people? No. Were there some conflicts and discord among them? Yes. But somehow these followers of Christ were different. They acknowledged their needs for God and for each other. They put a priority on unity and harmony at home and at church, endeavoring to fulfill the Gethsemane prayer of Jesus (*John 17:20–23*). They witnessed to each other and to unbelievers with boldness, even putting their lives at risk for their beliefs.

So must it be for us. Even in the current age, jaundiced as it is toward godly things, people who are excited about something still get a hearing. The Spirit longs to fill human hearts with excitement about the gospel. When the good news really becomes as good in our hearts as it is within the Word, sharing will be spontaneous and unstoppable.

What changes might need to be made in your own family that could help it be a better harbinger of “the message” we have been called to share?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “In the Court of Babylon,” pp. 479–490, in *Prophets and Kings*; “Words of Caution,” pp. 324, 329; “No Respect of Persons With God,” pp. 330, 331, in *Gospel Workers*; “Rejoicing in the Lord,” pp. 115–126, in *Steps to Christ*.

No respect of persons with God. “The religion of Christ uplifts the receiver to a higher plane of thought and action, while at the same time it presents the whole human race as alike the objects of the love of God, being purchased by the sacrifice of His Son. At the feet of Jesus, the rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, meet together, with no thought of caste or worldly preeminence. All earthly distinctions are forgotten as we look upon Him whom our sins have pierced. The self-denial, the condescension, the infinite compassion of Him who was highly exalted in heaven, puts to shame human pride, self-esteem, and social caste. Pure, undefiled religion manifests its heaven-born principles in bringing into oneness all who are sanctified through the truth. All meet as blood-bought souls, alike dependent upon Him who has redeemed them to God.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 330.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, discuss your answers to Sunday’s study.
- 2 What principles can we find in the Ellen G. White quote above that, if applied, would revolutionize our family lives?
- 3 How well has your local church done in nurturing the younger generation of believers? What can you as a class do to help the church in this important task?
- 4 What are the challenges of trying to pass on faith to another generation?
- 5 In what ways does the culture you live in impact your family life for good, and in what ways does it impact it for evil?

Powerhouse for God

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

An elderly man stopped in Delsie Knicely's family-owned store in rural West Virginia with a request.

"I'd like to see you in church this Sabbath," he said.

Knicely didn't want to go. She had been raised in the Seventh-day Adventist Church and had attended Adventist schools. But she had left the church as an adult, gotten married, and opened a store selling farm produce, groceries, and chain saws.

Still, she didn't want to flatly reject the man, Kester Erskine, whom she had known since childhood. Erskine used to drive to her parents' farm every Sabbath and pack her and her 11 brothers and sisters into his car, including in the trunk, and take them to church.

Now Erskine was in the store waiting for an answer to his invitation.

"I don't have proper clothes," Knicely said.

Erskine returned the next week, and Knicely offered another excuse.

"OK, I'll go if I'm not sick," she said.

That Friday, she was hospitalized with a serious blood clot. That scared her, and she resolved not to use health as an excuse to skip church.

Two weeks after the hospital stay, Erskine stopped by the store with a book, *National Sunday Law*, about how the Sabbath was changed to Sunday.

Knicely read the 94-page book by Adventist pastor A. Jan Marcussen that afternoon, marking the pages as she went along. She read the book again that evening and a third time the next day. She thought, *I went to Adventist church school and academy, and I know all this. Why haven't I been in church?*

"I couldn't think of a good reason," Knicely told Adventist Mission.

"So, I went to church and haven't missed a Sabbath since then."

Today, Knicely, a spry 63-year-old with a ready smile, is a powerhouse for God. She has led many evangelistic meetings, including a series during a statewide evangelistic campaign funded by a 2015 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. She also has graded thousands of Bible correspondence studies, and many people have been baptized through her influence.



Knicely said God must have a sense of humor. Ever since she claimed not to have anything to wear to church, her wardrobe has been full.

"The Lord has seen fit that I have had plenty of decent clothes since that time," she said.

Part I: Overview

Culture can be friend or foe as it engages the Christian faith. Families that want to stay true to the radical path of Christian discipleship will often be faced with cultural pressure to compromise standards of holiness. However, needless rejection of one's current cultural norms in the name of religion is a sign, not of sanctification, but of misguided zeal that can bring reproach on our Christian witness. Carefully discerning between which cultural norms are compatible with Christianity and which are not can be a source of intense disagreement among believers (e.g., the buildup to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15). A listening ear, a humble attitude, and sensitivity to the Spirit's direction are all needed to stay biblically faithful and culturally sensitive.

As Christian families navigate the level of cultural accommodation that they believe is appropriate, they can be sure there is no room within authentic Christianity for devaluing any human, for all have been made in His image (*Gen. 1:26, 27; 9:6*). If a culture disparages any group based on these criteria—gender, ethnicity, social class, mental or physical impairments, age, etc.—then there is a justifiable and grand opportunity to make a clean break with that culture and to reveal by one's actions a God who shows “no partiality” (*Rom. 2:11, ESV; Acts 10:34, ESV; Gal. 2:6, ESV*).

The families in the Bible provide a bevy of mistakes for us to learn from and to avoid. These families were inspired, at least partially, by the cultures in which they lived. From the Abram/Hagar blunder (*Genesis 16*) to the presence of idols in Jacob's household (*Genesis 35*), culture has always exerted its pressure on God's people. As you teach this week's Sabbath School lesson, convey the point that those unaware of the cultural influences in their lives may be unreflectively conforming to them.

Part II: Commentary

Culture: It's Everywhere

The problem with culture is that it is a driving force in our lives that escapes rigorous reflection. In the West, when a friend asks, “Do you want to get a cup of coffee before work?” few will express surprise when asked, because in the West coffee is a cultural beverage. Try instead asking a coworker, “Hey, would you like to grab some kiwis and applesauce after work?” and watch them smile suspiciously and ask, “Are you serious?” Why the surprise, though? Kiwis and applesauce are just as arbitrary as

coffee. But even though a much healthier choice, kiwis and applesauce have not taken their place among the food folkways of broader Western culture, so one will appear as an oddball for suggesting it.

The above is a relatively benign example. Bring up at the next board meeting whether churches should use older hymns or more contemporary praise songs, and brace yourself for a cultural clash. Things get even more complicated when music from other cultures migrates into vastly different areas, creating cross-cultural tensions. All this mixing and blending goes to show that culture is exerting a ubiquitous influence. Sometimes people will think they are being theologically astute in criticizing or affirming a church practice when in reality they are being compelled by the dominant culture or subculture they are a part of. To be aware of this dynamic is helpful across the church spectrum of views. Conservatives need to be wary that they are not “making holy” the nonessential features of their belief and practice in an effort to protect themselves from the dominant culture. Liberals should be wary of “dispensing with the holy” in an attempt to maximally accommodate the dominant culture.

Culture: Examples

Because the Seventh-day Adventist Church is spread around the globe, cultural influences on the church will be numerous and variegated. Families in the worldwide church will need to take stock of their own cultural environment and ask themselves how they can best resist, or take advantage of, their culture for the furthering of the kingdom of God. The lesson cites some examples of how culture influenced families in the Bible. Though the examples are all negative, it is instructive to consider how God accomplished His will, despite the cultural obstacles.

Abram, Sarai, and Hagar. The story is well known of how Abram and Sarai, desperate to have a natural-born heir, used Hagar the servant girl as a solution to Sarai’s infertility (*Gen. 16:2*). Though replicating their exact “solution” in today’s world would be shunned in most instances, surrogacy is a well-known option for would-be parents today. The cultural practice of surrogacy has remained, though the method has changed through medical intervention. The cultural continuity, though, helps us identify better with the story and Sarai’s predicament.

God’s promise to Abram was that he would have a natural-born heir (as opposed to Eliezer [*Gen. 15:4*]). A wife offering another woman to bear children in her behalf was culturally accepted in the ancient Near East and therefore was an ever-present option. This combination led Abram and Sarai to attempt a cultural shortcut to bring about God’s promise. Instead, this practice, though culturally accepted, interfered with God’s plan and provided unnecessary suffering and hardship for all involved. God eventually accomplished His will (despite Abram and Sarai’s blunder) with the birth of Isaac, and, in addition, took care of the ousted Hagar and Ishmael.

It appears from the narrative that neither Sarai nor Abram sought counsel from God concerning their plan to bring about His promise; and they paid for it for years (maybe a lifetime) afterward.

A principle can be derived from this story: when attempting to cooperate with God's plans, utilizing practices just because they are culturally permissible may do more harm than good. Prayerful consideration and a dose of realism could have averted the entire fiasco. (Peaceful polygamous marriages in Scripture are rare. This point is telling if one believes that the Scriptures accurately reflect the history and culture of the times.)

Centuries later, Israel's obstinate insistence on having a king to rule over it would serve as an example of cultural accommodation with disastrous consequences for the destiny of the entire nation. And the people said, "Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations'" (*1 Sam. 8:5, ESV*). God knew this choice was an outright rejection of Himself as their king (*1 Sam. 8:7*), with no better reason offered than to be "like everyone else." This desire for a king is cultural accommodation at its worst. Anyone who has read the account of Israel's and Judah's kings knows that for the most part, their desire for a king resulted in disaster. But there are two important points worth noting: (1) God allowed them to make this cultural accommodation, even choosing their first king for them; (2) God worked within the framework of Israel's sinful decision, even to the point of rooting Messianic prophecies into the monarchy. What a God! Setting a human king over Israel was not God's perfect will. The entire history of God's people might have been vastly different if they would have chosen to remain, possibly, the single nation on the planet without a visible human leader. But God is able to initiate plan B or C or Q, regardless of our choices. He does not easily give up on His people.

When the church or its families make sinful cultural accommodations, even ones that have long-lasting effects, it seems God is big enough to work around, and through, our misguided decisions. Nor does He hold us under a state of continual rejection or wrath. The natural consequences of our wrongheaded decisions can sometimes be punishment enough, as with Israel's monarchy (i.e., the king will take your land, livestock, crops, and children [*1 Sam. 8:9–19*]). It would be detrimental to use this angle of God's mercy as liberty simply to go with the cultural flow. God's kindness and patience in these things is meant to "lead . . . to repentance," not further sin (*Rom. 2:4, 5, ESV*). God's people often trip over themselves in navigating how to live out their faith in their respective cultures. Yet, God knows exactly how to intersect His kingdom perfectly into every cultural context. As we cooperate with Him, He not only guides us through His Word and Spirit but can make up for our mistakes, as well.

Culture: A Threat

Choosing which cultural trends to mention that are antagonistic to the gospel is difficult because of the varied cultural audience these lessons are reaching. Choosing one trend will neglect ten. However, Western secularization is a phenomenon that is spreading its influence beyond its borders. The following quote by J. Gresham Machen was given at the opening of the 101st session of Princeton Theological Seminary. It addresses a cultural secularization that would demote the Christian message to that of a fairy tale. It is broad enough in its scope, though, to apply to any cultural milieu toxic to Christianity. It was spoken in 1912:

“False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion. Under such circumstances, what God desires us to do is to destroy the obstacle at its root.”—“Christianity and Culture,” *The Princeton Theological Review*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1913), p. 7.

Part III: Life Application

Here are some exercises and thought experiments that can get the Sabbath School class reflecting on culture, Christianity, and families.

1. **“Culture relativism” is a helpful model in learning to understand different cultures from within *their own* perspectives. However, it becomes problematic if all cultural practices are considered immune from moral judgments. How could someone respond that a moral judgment on a cultural practice has some objective validity?**

2. What are the cultural trends right now in your community that are working against the gospel? Are there any working for it? If so, what are they?

3. Think of Jesus' parables describing the "kingdom of God" and use them as a benchmark for the ideal culture. How would you recast your own culture to look more like the heavenly one?

4. Ask the class about practices among our own church members that concern them or challenge their faith. Write these practices on a white/chalkboard. Now ask whether there are clear biblical injunctions against anything on the list. If there are not, float the idea that these practices may be cultural rather than biblical.
