

Ethnicity and Discipleship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 15:21–28; Luke 7:1–11; John 1:3; Acts 10:28, 34, 35; 11:25–30.*

Memory Text: “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (*1 Corinthians 9:22, RSV*).

Jim felt called to take the gospel to a foreign country. Upon arrival, he discovered that the people had a test for foreigners to earn the right to stay among them. The foreigner had to swallow, and not regurgitate, a potion. If the person failed the test, he or she had to leave immediately; otherwise, they could be eaten by the tribe. Jim watched the tribe prepare the potion of milk, human saliva, blood, chewed-up herbs, and other herbal concoctions. It looked and smelled sickening. All he could do was pray—and drink. To everyone’s amazement (especially his own), Jim drank it and held it down, earning the right to remain.

Making disciples might require us to do strange things: eat or drink strange mixtures and be all things to all people so we can win some. This is the call and challenge of discipleship, especially as the gospel goes around the world and into cultures sometimes radically different from our own.

The Week at a Glance: What other examples do we have of Jesus ministering to others besides Jews? Who were the God-fearers, and what can we learn from them about discipleship? What can we learn today from the Antioch model of discipleship?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 9.*

Disciples Among the Samaritans

Look up the following texts. What can we learn from them about God's attitude toward all races and people? *John 1:3; Acts 10:28, 34, 35; 17:26–28; Heb. 2:9.*

Scripture is clear: Not only did Christ create all humanity, He died for all humanity as well, regardless of race, nationality, or ethnic origin. The universality of Christ's death, the fact that His death was for every human being, should be more than enough to show us how repugnant prejudice is to God.

It is no wonder, then, that when Jesus was here, He ministered not just to the Jews but to non-Jews, as well. Though Paul is understood to be the *apostle to the Gentiles*, Jesus was already witnessing to them when here in the flesh.

Read Luke 17:11–16 and John 4:39–42. What is going on here? What message should we take away from these texts?

Last week's lesson showed that the woman at the well left her water pots and went to invite the villagers to meet Jesus after He had told her everything she ever did. She even introduced the possibility of His being the Messiah. Scripture says that many of the villagers believed because of the woman's testimony. When they met Jesus, they persuaded Him to stay, presumably to teach them.

The story of the ten lepers (*Luke 17:11–16*) also speaks to Jesus' work for Samaritans. The tenth leper, who returned to give thanks, was a Samaritan. By praising God in a loud voice, he showed his gratefulness for what Jesus had done for him. Jesus told this Samaritan that his faith had made him well. The Greek word used for this healing denotes the idea of being saved. This implies that the Samaritan's faith had saved him not only physically but spiritually. Jesus also called the Samaritan a foreigner. Despite knowing him to be a Samaritan and a foreigner, Jesus did not discriminate against him but rewarded his faith. These encounters show that Jesus did not conform to the prejudices of His time.

It is one thing to say we should not harbor prejudice against anyone; it is another, actually, to be free of these poisonous emotions. What practical steps can you take to help break the bonds of prejudice in your own heart?

The God-Fearers

In the first century, some Gentiles were called God-fearers. They nominally accepted Judaism, made gifts to synagogues, and attended Sabbath services. They did not, however, submit to proselyte baptism or adopt all the rabbinic regulations. One such God-fearer was the centurion of Luke 7:1–11.

Read Luke 7:1–11. From these texts, what can we learn about the faith and character of this Gentile disciple?

For Jesus, the faith of this centurion “was an earnest of the work which the gospel was to accomplish among the Gentiles. With joy He looked forward to the gathering of souls from all nations to His kingdom.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 317.

Acts 10 mentions another Roman official. Cornelius was a devout God-fearer and a centurion. He was generous to the needy and prayed earnestly to God. God sent an angel to inform him of the acceptance of his gifts and prayers and sent him in search of Peter. Peter went to his home, contrary to Jewish scruples, and was even reprimanded for it. But God told him not to call common or unclean those, like Cornelius, whom He had cleansed.

As Peter preached to Cornelius’s assembled household (*Acts 10:44–46*), the Holy Spirit interrupted him with the Gentile Pentecost, to the amazement of his Jewish companions.

Read Acts 11:1–3. What was the reaction of the Jewish followers of Jesus? What makes that reaction so shocking to us today? What message can we take away from their actions?

Here they were, themselves followers of Jesus, yet not understanding the fullness of the gospel. How careful we should be not to allow any cultural, educational, or social influences contrary to the principles of Christ to hinder us from living to the fullest the profession we claim for ourselves.

The Canaanite

At one point in His ministry, Jesus withdrew to the regions of Tyre and Sidon. He had to, in a sense, get out of town because things were getting tense with the leaders. In this Gentile territory He entered a house but did not want anyone to know it (*Mark 7:24*). Yet, a Canaanite woman soon found Him.

Read Matthew 15:21–28 and answer the following questions:

1. Why did the woman call Jesus by a Messianic name, “Son of David”? What did that imply concerning her knowledge of Jesus?

2. How did His disciples react to her, and why was that typical of them?

3. What kind of appeal did she make? How helpless is she?

4. What things happened that should have discouraged her but did not?

Despite coming from a *despised* nation that had a long history of enmity with Israel, despite being ignored at first by Jesus, despite the attitude of the disciples, even despite Christ’s own words to her at first, she knew that Jesus was her only hope. Perhaps it was a tenacity born out of desperation. Who knows? But in the end, we are all just as dependent upon Christ, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Jesus also has a powerful lesson for His own disciples. Christ’s purpose was to teach them about the need to work for non-Jews, and this He did by acting out the contrast between the usual attitudes and His own. These Twelve had a lot to learn about what it meant to be disciples.

Look again at this woman. What can we learn from her attitudes, actions, words, and faith that can make us better disciples?

Philip and the Ethiopian Official

One of the most fascinating stories about discipleship is found in Acts 8:26–40. It is the story of Philip and the eunuch.

Read the whole story (*Acts 8:26–40*) and answer the following questions:

1. What indications show us that this man already had some knowledge of truth and was a seeker after truth?

2. What role did the Scriptures play in his becoming a disciple?

3. What can we learn about discipleship from the role of Philip in this story? What characteristics did Philip show that made him such an effective witness for the Lord?

In this story, providence played a powerful role, did it not? After obeying the angel, Philip met the eunuch on the road. Interesting, too, that Philip was to go from Jerusalem to Gaza (What symbolism do you see there?). The Ethiopian was, apparently, another God-fearer. He also just happened to be reading the Bible, and not only the Scripture but Isaiah, and not only Isaiah but the greatest Messianic prophecy in all the Bible, chapter 53. This chapter, of course, depicts Christ's substitutionary death for us. Then, after Philip explained to him the meaning of the Scripture, they came to a certain water, and the eunuch wanted to be baptized. Everything fell right into place.

Read Acts 8:39. The eunuch went on his way *rejoicing*, surely about His newfound discovery of Jesus' dying for His sins. We say that faith is not feeling and that we need to maintain faith even when we feel bad. At the same time, why should we, as disciples who have been forgiven our sins through the death of Jesus, always have a place in our heart for rejoicing, regardless of our immediate circumstances?

The Antioch Church

The persecution that followed the stoning of Stephen and the pre-conversion activities of Saul of Tarsus took the gospel to many lands. Among the places it went was Syrian Antioch, where the first organized presentation of the gospel for Gentiles occurred. Luke says that the Lord was with this initiative and that “a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (*Acts 11:21, NIV*). So phenomenal was the growth that the Jerusalem leaders sent Barnabas to assist them.

Upon his arrival, Barnabas secured the help of Saul of Tarsus for this discipleship mission. This had a positive effect on the church. It not only caused the church to grow but also gave it a sense of social concern, stewardship, and mission.

Read Acts 11:25–30. What were the issues? How did the church respond? What lessons can we take away from this account for our mission today?

Notice, too, that when Paul and Barnabas got to Antioch, they taught much people for a year. What should that tell us about the importance of teaching in the question of discipleship?

Acts 13:1–3 reveals more about the makeup of the early church. We know that Barnabas was a Cypriot Jew; Saul, of course, came from Tarsus, another city that was not part of Israel proper. Manaen was either a good friend or foster-brother of Herod Antipas. Simeon was called *Niger*, the Latin word for “black.” Lucius hailed from Cyrene in North Africa. This means that the leadership of the church was ethnically diverse, with some of the leaders not being Jews at all.

These leaders took their discipleship seriously. They worshiped the Lord with fasting and prayer. It was to this church, one that took discipleship seriously, that the Spirit revealed God’s will for missions. Saul and Barnabas were commissioned and consecrated to take the gospel to the ends of the earth in fulfillment of Acts 1:8.

Thus, we see in these texts mission, teaching, consecration, and dedication of both Jew and Gentile, as the cornerstones of discipleship.

The needs of others present the church with great opportunities for service and witness. No doubt there are a great many needs around you. How well have you taken advantage of these needs to serve others and to witness to them about Jesus?

Further Study: Read *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 626, 627, 1021–1025; Ellen G. White, “The Centurion,” pp. 315–318; “Barriers Broken Down,” pp. 399–403; “In the Outer Court,” pp. 621–623, in *The Desire of Ages*; John 12:20–33, Acts 9:1–31, 22:1–21, 26:2–18.

“He [the Centurion] had not seen the Saviour, but the reports he heard had inspired him with faith. Notwithstanding the formalism of the Jews, this Roman was convinced that their religion was superior to his own. Already he had broken through the barriers of national prejudice and hatred that separated the conquerors from the conquered people. He had manifested respect for the service of God, and had shown kindness to the Jews as His worshipers. In the teaching of Christ, as it had been reported to him, he found that which met the need of the soul. All that was spiritual within him responded to the Saviour’s words.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 315.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Look more closely at the Antioch model. What things could your local church learn from this model that could make it a more effective witness for Christ?
- ② As a church, the Adventists are very good at getting people to join, as our growing numbers of baptisms prove. We are, though, struggling with the question of discipleship, the question of what to do with these people after we baptize them. As we know, far too many who join soon leave. What are your own thoughts on this problem? What has been your experience with being discipled after you were baptized and joined the church? What do you wish might have been done differently with you? What do you think your local church could do, must do, to disciple new members better? Be prepared to talk about this issue in your Sabbath School class.
- ③ The eunuch was reading Isaiah 53. Go over the chapter and review what it tells us about the death of Jesus on our behalf. What does the text tell us that Jesus did for us? What hope does it offer? Why is it so important to keep His death for us at the forefront of all our witnessing? Why is it so important that we keep the Cross at the front and center of all our discipling, as well?

Are You Sure?

by HOMER TRECARTIN

Raquel's parents are church planters for their denomination in Brazil. Their first church plant has 10,000 members, and their second numbered 2,000 when Raquel moved to the United States to study.

Raquel missed home and yearned to hear her native Portuguese. She met a Brazilian Adventist couple who befriended her and invited her to church. She went once, but she loved her own church.

A year later the Adventist couple told Raquel that they were planting a new church and invited her to visit. Raquel went and felt drawn to this group. She began studying the Bible and shared what she was learning with her parents.

Raquel's worried mother pleaded, "Those Adventists are a cult. They will brainwash you." Raquel explained that no one was brainwashing her, she was just studying the Bible. But her mother worried even more.

Then her brother came to visit. Raquel knew that her parents had sent him to "straighten her out," but she was glad to have family nearby. David insisted that they attend their family church on Sunday, and Raquel agreed—provided David attended the Adventist church with her on Sabbath. David thought he would see how this cult was misleading her.

Three months later David and Raquel were still attending the Adventist church on Sabbath and their family's church on Sunday. David studied the Bible, too, trying to prove Raquel wrong. When Raquel decided to be baptized, David asked her, "Are you sure you want to do this? You know what it is going to do to Mother and Father?"

"Yes, David," Raquel replied. "It will break their hearts, but I have to follow Jesus."

She noticed tears on David's cheeks. Then David said, "Raquel, I want to be baptized with you."

When they told their parents the news, their mother cried. But their father said simply, "Be faithful to what you believe God wants you to do."

Raquel's parents came to the United States for her wedding. They visited the Adventist church with their children. It seemed strange to them, but they saw the deep love Raquel and David have for Jesus. They still attend the church they planted in Brazil, but they are studying the things Raquel and David are sharing with them.

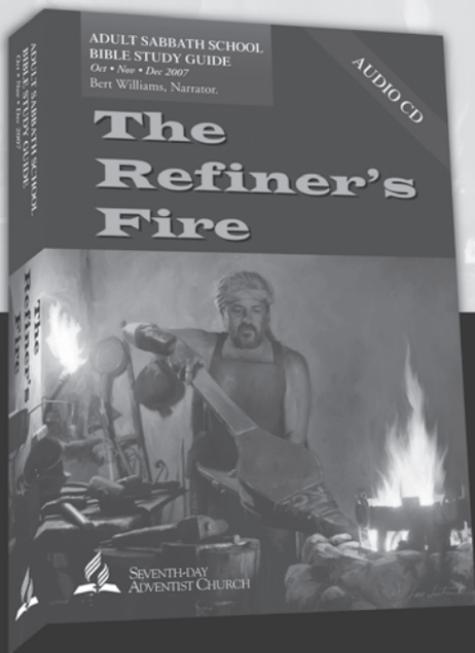
Your mission offerings help plant new churches such as the one Raquel and David attend.

HOMER TRECARTIN is special projects coordinator for the Office of Adventist Mission in the General Conference.

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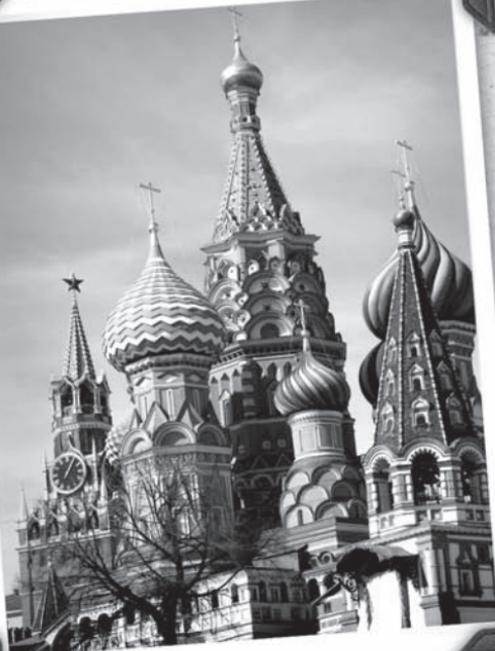
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Houses of Worship

I traveled through eleven time zones in Russia, Moldova, and Belarus, worshipping with fellow believers in simple house churches, unfinished buildings, and in a dark basement hall. For now, these are the only places many church members can afford. Believers would love to have a traditional house of worship, but it will take years to raise the money needed to complete their church building projects.

We can help our friends in the former Soviet Union to reach out for Christ by providing the means to finish their church building projects. In some places, they are anxiously waiting for funds so that they can start building a new church in their area. How wonderful it would be for them to have a real place of worship to welcome their new believers!

This Thirteenth Sabbath I'm going to give a special offering to help my new friends who are trying to finish God's work without the funds they need. For me it's personal.

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