

Community¹



SABBATH—JUNE 13

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Genesis 11:1–4; Genesis 12:1–3; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 4:1–13; Revelation 22:1–6.

MEMORY VERSE: “You are the body of Christ. Each one of you is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27, NIV).

HUMANS (MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN) ARE SOCIAL PEOPLE. God could have created a hundred million perfect human beings as “stand alones,” who lived separate lives. But instead, He first created one man and one woman and said that it would not be good for man to be alone. The first couple was to support each other. And they were to multiply and create a community of family members and, later on, larger social groups.

One of the most important social groups 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 the same interest. The church is a community of believers who share in the greatest experience of salvation² and recognize Christ as their Lord.

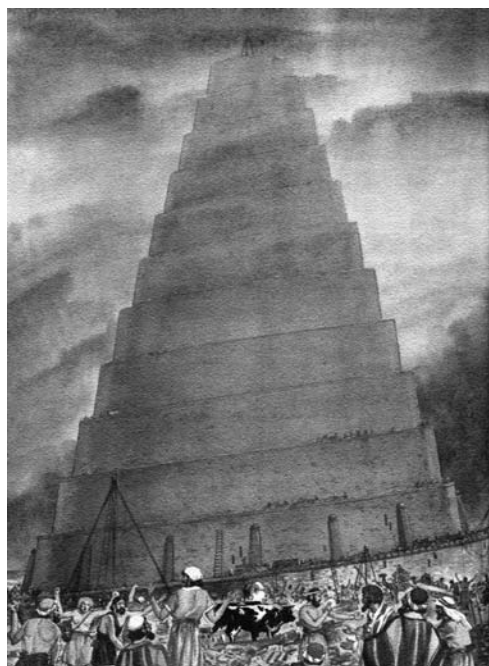
A QUICK LOOK AT THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Believing and belonging are closely connected. God wants us to be part of the community that He has started. It is an honor to belong to that community. But it also carries responsibilities. We all have our special contribution to make to the body (group) of Christ.

1. community—a group of people living, working, or worshiping together.

2. salvation—God's plan for saving sinners from eternal (without end) death; the gift of eternal life.

SUNDAY—JUNE 14**GOD WANTS A PEOPLE
(Genesis 11:1–4)**

In Genesis 11, we find the record of an experiment in community building that did not meet with God's approval. After the worldwide Flood, the future children of the people who escaped on the ark decided to get together and build a city with a huge tower in the southern part of what is now Iraq. But God was very displeased. This was not what God had planned. But, in the following chapter—Genesis 12—the idea of community building was attempted once again. This time it was very positive. God told Abram (Abraham) that He wanted to group together people whom He would call His own.



God was not pleased with the people who built the Tower of Babel.

What was the big difference between the Tower of Babel community-building project in Genesis 11:1–4 and God's plan to make Abraham and his future children into His people in Genesis 12:1–3?

From the story of the calling of Abraham, the Old Testament is about the experiences of the people of God, their failures and their victories (wins). The people of Israel had the mission (special work) of making 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 do its work. When the Messiah came, He was refused and killed as a criminal by certain leaders who should have welcomed Him as their Savior. At the same time, many remained faithful to the Lord and formed a small group of what was to become the Christian church.

What is the message in 1 Peter 2:9, 10 to us today?

God's New Testament people include Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews), men and women from every nation, tribe, and language group. The same as Israel in Old Testament times, they now have the responsibility of teaching others about God's grace.³ The same as Israel of old, they, too, belong to a special community of believers.

How are old-time Israel and the church of today the same? How

3. grace—God's gift of forgiveness and mercy that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

are they different? What lessons should we learn from them? What mistakes should we avoid?

MONDAY—JUNE 15

THE HONOR OF BELONGING (1 Corinthians 12:12–27)

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

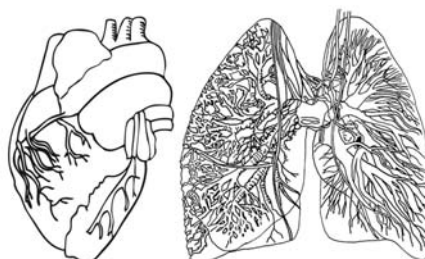
In many places, Paul speaks of fellow believers as saints (Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:2). Today this word has received a meaning that it did not have in Bible times. Saints are not perfect or holy people. They certainly are not people who have been announced as saints long after they die. “For Paul [and for other Bible writers], the word *saint* did not mean holy people as it means to modern people. A saint was not a perfect Christian but anyone called and set apart by God who became part of the community of faith.”—Adapted from John C. Brunt, *Romans*, The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1996), page 42.

According to 1 Corinthians 12:12–27, what important part is given to those who belong to the

church—the body of Christ? How should each saint relate to all others?

A church member is not to be reduced to just a number. Every member of the church has a special duty to do and an important contribution to make. No one can be missed without harming the church body. At the same time, no member can claim that his or her contribution is much better than that of someone else. The idea of the body with its many members shows this truth. Some parts appear to be more important than others. The heart, the brain, the lungs, and the stomach may seem to be among the more important parts. But when some minor gland (part of the inner body) fails to work properly, it often proves to be a matter of life and death.

How do you fit in with your local church body? Are you satisfied with the part you play? Are you jealous of someone else’s part? 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 part should be?



Just as the body needs every part to work and keep us alive, the church needs all its members in order to function well.

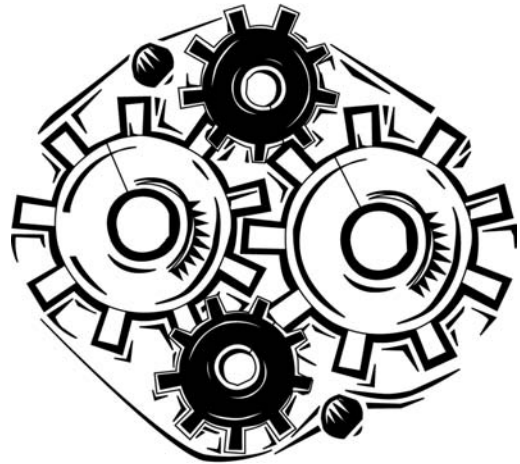
TUESDAY—JUNE 16**THE RESPONSIBILITY OF BELONGING (Ephesians 4:1–13)**

Belonging to the body of Christ is a great honor. Another word-picture points to this great truth: we all are part of God's family. "How great is the love the Father has given so freely! Now we can be called children of God" (1 John 3:1, NIV). But responsibilities (duties) always come with rights.

Each of us is a member of the church as the body of Christ. But according to Ephesians 4:1–13, how do our personal responsibilities fit in with the picture of the church as that body?

"All must move like parts of a well-run machine. Each part depends on the other part. But it is different in action. And each one is to take the place given to him and do the work chosen for him. God calls upon the members of His church to receive the Holy Spirit, to come together in unity [oneness] and to tie their interests together in brotherly and sisterly love."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, page 276.

According to 1 Corinthians 16:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:14, 17, 25; Hebrews 10:25; and 1 Peter 3:15, what are some other important responsibilities for all church members?



All parts of the church work together like a well-run machine. Each part depends on the other part.

Many people live in business societies. So, as a result, they bring a business approach to doing things into their church. The first question often is, *What is in it for me?* rather than, *How can I help others with my talents and gifts?* In 1961, when John F. Kennedy was sworn in as president of the United States, he spoke these famous words: " 'Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.' " We should show this kind of attitude (feeling) toward the church. The church can and does do a lot for those who faithfully attend and join in its many activities. But we should always 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 help make my local church a spiritual (holy) home where many can find the inner peace and encouragement they need?

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

WEDNESDAY—JUNE 17

DIFFERENCES WITHIN UNITY (ONENESS) (John 14:6)

Many Christians work hard for greater unity among the many different churches. They speak of the scandal of being separate and apart. They remind us that Christ repeatedly called for unity among His followers. Unity also is an important theme (idea) for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which has had threats of division and differences of opinion from its members. But unity must be based on more than sharing the same style of worship. It must go much deeper.

According to John 14:6 and Ephesians 4:3, 13, what is needed for true Christian unity?

To be united (joined together as one) in Christ means to be united in the truth. Christ described Himself as the Truth. That does not mean that there cannot be true unity between people who do not agree on religious views or issues or on the interpretation (meaning) of certain verses. But true unity does require a shared

belief in the Bible as the Word of God and its basic teachings. It also requires sharing a desire to practice what the Word teaches. But it does not require that all members think the same and worship in exactly the same way. It does not remove the wonderful cultural⁴ differences that enrich our worldwide church community.

How does the description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:12–14, 19, 26 and Revelation 22:2 show that God’s people are different?

The New Jerusalem is something real that God creates for His people. And His people come from “ ‘every tribe and language and people and nation’ ” (Revelation 5:9, NIV; read also Revelation 7:9).

The peoples who will enter the gates of the New Jerusalem and will fill the new earth are like the many branches that come from the same vine. “In the branches of a vine, there are differences. And in these differences, there is unity. Every branch is united to the parent stalk (stem). Every branch draws its food from the same stalk. When we are branches of the True Vine, there will be no quarreling among us and no fighting for power or control. There will be no disagreements with one another.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *General Conference Bulletin*, April 25, 1901.

4. cultural—having to do with the ideas, skills, arts, tools, and way of life of a certain people at a certain time.



Saved people will come from “ ‘every tribe and language and people and nation’ ” of the earth.

Why do we often want to worship only with people who are like us as opposed to those who are different from us? What kind of message are we sending by doing this?

THURSDAY—JUNE 18

THE CHURCH’S FOUNDATION (BASIS): JESUS CHRIST (Matthew 16:18)

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 we have good reasons to have a clear sense of ownership of the church. But, in the final sum-up, the church is not ours. It is God’s. And that makes a big difference.

According to Matthew 16:18, what did Christ Himself say in answer to the question “To whom does the church belong?”

Many people have misunderstood the example given by Christ about the rock upon which God’s church was to be built. Upon studying proof from the Bible, we find no reason for suggesting that Peter was the rock upon whom the church was founded. And there is no proof that special authority (power) was transferred (moved) from Peter to the future bishops of Rome. Peter’s confession of Christ as the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16) was the Rock upon which God founded His church.

Consider the meaning of some other symbols (word-pictures) used to underline the same truth. For example, the church is built on Jesus Christ, and it is His church rather than ours. Read Ephesians 2:20; Ephesians 4:15, 16; Revelation 1:12–16, 20.

Like so many verses in the book of Revelation, the description of Jesus Christ in Revelation 1:12–20 is full of Old Testament symbols. Christ is shown as walking in the midst of seven lampstands, clothed as the High Priest. Our mind goes back to the symbol of the lampstand in the old-time sanctuary that showed God’s presence among His people. Before the book of Revelation explains more about “what will happen soon” (Revelation 1:1, NIV), it makes sure that we see everything with the right view. It shows Jesus Christ, the Alpha (the Beginning) and the Omega (the End), the First and the Last, our heavenly High Priest. Jesus is not some far-off god but the True God who walks in the midst of His church.

If the church belongs to God, what is our part in it? Are we stewards of it? What kind of responsibilities does this put on us? How well are you living up to this responsibility? What can you do better?

FRIDAY—JUNE 19

ADDITIONAL STUDY: For a thorough Adventist study on the nature of the church, read R. Dederen, editor, *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 2000), pages 538–581. Read also chapter 45 of Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pages 410–418.

“Jesus replied [answered], ‘Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! No mere man showed this to you. My Father in heaven showed it to you’ [Matthew 16:17, NlrV].

“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 [forever] life. But having this knowledge was no reason for glorifying [praising and honoring] self. It had not been shown to Peter because of his own wisdom or goodness. No man can ever reach the knowledge of God. ‘They [the mysteries of God] are higher than the heavens. What can you do? They are deeper than the deepest grave. What can you know?’” Job 11:8, NlrV. Only the spirit of our adoption [the act of God call-

ing us and making us His children] can show to us the deep things of God.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 412.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ❶ Is church membership a necessary requirement for salvation? Or do we join the church for other reasons? If so, what are they? What great advantages (profits) 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.” How would you answer such a person?
- ❸ Why, of all people, should Christians be the most accepting and loving of others, no matter how different they are? What could be done to help us better live up to what we know the Lord would have us do about treating all people with respect, no matter what our differences?

SUMMARY: The church is of God. It is God’s church rather than our church. We are members of the body of Christ—each of us with our own special work. But we always must remember that He is the Head. We are not called to be all the same but must do all we can to keep true unity in Christ.