

# The Experience of Unity in the Early Church



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Acts 1:12–14, Acts 2:5–13, Rev. 14:12, Acts 2:42–47, Acts 4:32–37, Acts 5:1–11, 2 Cor. 9:8–15.*

**Memory Text:** “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (*Acts 2:42, NKJV*).

Church unity is the result of a shared spiritual experience in Jesus, who is the truth. “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (*John 14:6*). Solid bonds of fellowship are forged in a common spiritual journey and experience. Early Adventists had such an experience in the Millerite movement. Their common experience in 1844 tied their hearts together as they sought to find an explanation for their disappointment. This experience gave birth to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the truth about the pre-Advent judgment and all that it entails.

The experience of Jesus’ disciples after His ascension to heaven is a testimony to the power of God’s Word, prayer, and common fellowship in creating unity and harmony among believers of widely different backgrounds. That same experience still is possible today.

“I would insist that fellowship is a particularly important element in corporate worship. . . . There is no substitute to the Christian for the realization of the spiritual bond which unites him with other believers and with the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . Jesus Christ first brings a soul to Himself, but then He always unites that soul to other believers in His body, the church.”—Robert G. Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), p. 91.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 3.

## Days of Preparation

In the last hours spent with the disciples before His death, Jesus promised that He would not leave them alone. Another Comforter, the Holy Spirit, would be sent to accompany them in their ministry. The Spirit would help them remember many things Jesus had said and done (*John 14:26*), and would guide them in discovering more truths (*John 16:13*). On the day of His ascension Jesus renewed this promise. “You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” . . . ‘You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you’” (*Acts 1:5, 8, NKJV*). The Holy Spirit’s power will be given to enable the disciples to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth (*Acts 1:8*).

**Read** Acts 1:12–14. What did the disciples do during this period of ten days?

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We can imagine these ten days as a period of intense spiritual preparation, a kind of retreat during which these disciples share together their memories of Jesus, His deeds, His teachings, and His miracles. They were of “one accord in prayer and supplication” (*Acts 1:14*).

“As the disciples waited for the fulfillment of the promise, they humbled their hearts in true repentance and confessed their unbelief. As they called to remembrance the words that Christ had spoken to them before His death they understood more fully their meaning. Truths which had passed from their memory were again brought to their minds, and these they repeated to one another. They reproached themselves for their misapprehension of the Saviour. Like a procession, scene after scene of His wonderful life passed before them. As they meditated upon His pure, holy life they felt that no toil would be too hard, no sacrifice too great, if only they could bear witness in their lives to the loveliness of Christ’s character. Oh, if they could but have the past three years to live over, they thought, how differently they would act! If they could only see the Master again, how earnestly they would strive to show Him how deeply they loved Him, and how sincerely they sorrowed for having ever grieved Him by a word or an act of unbelief! But they were comforted by the thought that they were forgiven. And they determined that, so far as possible, they would atone for their unbelief by bravely confessing Him before the world. . . . Putting away all differences, all desire for the supremacy, they came close together in Christian fellowship.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 36, 37.

**What things do you wish you could do over in regard to your faith? What can you learn from your regrets about the past that can help you make a better future?**

## From Babel to Pentecost

The days of spiritual preparation, following Jesus' ascension, culminated in the events of Pentecost. The first verse tells us that on that day, just before the Holy Spirit was poured upon the disciples, they were all together, of "one accord," in one place (*Acts 2:1*).

In the Old Testament, Pentecost was the second of three major feasts that every male Israelite was obligated to attend. It was held fifty days (in Greek, *pentekoste*, fiftieth day) after Passover. During that feast the Hebrews presented to God the firstfruits of their summer harvest as an offering of thanksgiving.

It is likely, also, that by the time of Jesus the Feast of Pentecost included a celebration of the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, as well (*Exod. 19:1*). Thus, we see here the continued importance of God's law as part and parcel of the Christian message regarding Jesus, whose death offers everyone who repents forgiveness for their violation of God's law. No wonder one of the crucial texts regarding the last days deals with both the law and the gospel: "Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (*Rev. 14:12, NKJV*).

Also, as with Mount Sinai, when Moses received the Ten Commandments (*Exod. 19:16–25, Heb. 12:18*), numerous extraordinary phenomena occurred at this Pentecost. "And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (*Acts 2:2–4, NKJV*).

**Read Acts 2:5–13. What is the significance of this amazing event?**

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Pentecost was to be a joyous feast, a feast of thanksgiving to the Lord for His bounties. Here, perhaps, is the reason for the false accusation of drunkenness (*Acts 2:13–15*). God's power especially is seen in the miracle of speaking and hearing in diverse tongues. Jews from all over the Roman Empire who came to Jerusalem for this feast heard the message of Jesus, the Messiah, in their own languages.

In a unique way, Pentecost helps undo the dispersion of the original human family and the formation of ethnic groups, which began in earnest at the Tower of Babel. The miracle of grace begins the reunifying of the human family. The unity of God's church on a global scale testifies to the nature of His kingdom as restoring what was lost at Babel.

## Unity of Fellowship

In response to Peter's sermon and appeal for repentance and salvation, about three thousand people made a decision to accept Jesus as the Messiah and the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises to Israel. God was at work in the hearts of all these people. Many had heard about Jesus from far away and may have traveled to Jerusalem with the hope of seeing Him. Some may have seen Jesus and heard His messages of God's salvation but had not made a commitment to become a follower. At Pentecost, God miraculously intervened in the lives of the disciples and used them as witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus. Now they know that, in Jesus' name, people can have the forgiveness of their sins (*Acts 2:38*).

**Read Acts 2:42–47.** What activities did these early followers of Jesus do as a community of believers? What created this amazing unity of fellowship?

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It is remarkable that the first activity this community of new believers engaged in was learning the apostles' teaching. Bible instruction is an important way to facilitate the spiritual growth of new believers. Jesus had given the commission to His disciples to teach them " 'all things that I have commanded you' " (*Matt. 28:20, NKJV*). This new community spent time learning from the apostles all about Jesus. They likely heard about Jesus' life and ministry; His teachings, parables, and sermons; and His miracles, all explained as the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures in the writings of the prophets.

They also spent time in prayer and the breaking of bread. It is unclear whether the breaking of bread is a direct allusion to the Lord's Supper or simply a reference to sharing meals together, as *Acts 2:46* seems to imply. The mention of fellowship certainly infers that this new community spent time together, often and regularly, both in the temple in Jerusalem, which still served as the center of their devotions and worship, and in their private homes. They shared an intimate life. They ate and prayed together. Prayer is a vital element of a community of faith, and it is essential to spiritual growth. This new community spent time in worship. We are told that these activities were done "steadfastly."

This steadfast fellowship generated good relationships with others in Jerusalem. The new believers are described as "having favor with all the people" (*Acts 2:47, NKJV*). No doubt the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives made a powerful impression on those around them and served as a powerful witness to the truth of Jesus as the Messiah.

**What can your local church learn from the example set here in regard to unity, fellowship, and witness?**

## Generosity and Greed

Luke tells us that one of the natural outgrowths of the fellowship experienced by Jesus' followers soon after Pentecost was their mutual support of each other. "Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need" (*Acts 2:44, 45, NKJV*).

This sharing of common goods is not a requirement of the community, but a voluntary outgrowth of their love for each other in the fellowship they experience. It also is a concrete expression of their unity. This mutual support continued for some time, and we are given more details about it in Acts 4 and 5. It also is a theme that we find in other places in the New Testament, as we will see next.

It is in this context that Barnabas is introduced for the first time. He appears to be a wealthy person who owned land. Having sold his property for the benefit of the community, he brought the money to the apostles (*Acts 4:36, 37*). Barnabas is portrayed as an example to follow.

**Read Acts 4:32–37 and 5:1–11. Compare the behaviors and attitudes of Barnabas with those of Ananias and Sapphira. What went wrong with this couple?**

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Besides their sin of outright lying to the Holy Spirit, these people also displayed greed and covetousness. Perhaps no sin can destroy fellowship and brotherly love faster than selfishness and greed. If Barnabas serves as a positive example of the early church's spirit of fellowship, Ananias and Sapphira are the opposite. Luke is honest in sharing this story about less virtuous people in the community.

In the Ten Commandments (*Exod. 20:1–17*), the last commandment, about covetousness, is unlike the others. While other commandments speak of actions that visibly transgress God's will for humanity, the last commandment is about what is hidden in the heart. The sin of covetousness is not an action; rather, it is a thought process. Covetousness, and its companion selfishness, is not a visible sin but a condition of sinful human nature. It becomes visible only when manifested in selfish actions, such as what was seen here with Ananias and Sapphira. In a sense the last commandment reveals the root of the evil manifested in the actions condemned by all the other commandments. Their covetousness opened them to Satan's influence, which led them to lie to God; this is not unlike what Judas's covetousness led him to do, as well.

**What are ways in which we can seek to uproot covetousness from our own lives? Why is praise and thanksgiving for what we have a powerful antidote to this evil?**

## Remember the Poor

The sharing of one's resources was often a tangible expression of unity in the early church. The generosity described in the early chapters of the book of Acts continues later with Paul's inviting the churches he has established in Macedonia and Achaia to make a contribution for the poor in Jerusalem (*see Acts 11:27–30, Gal. 2:10, Rom. 15:26, and 1 Cor. 16:1–4*). That gift becomes a tangible expression of the fact that churches, consisting mainly of Gentile believers, care and love their brothers and sisters of Jewish heritage in Jerusalem. In spite of cultural and ethnic differences, they form one body in Christ and cherish together the same gospel. This sharing with those in need not only reveals the unity that already existed in the church but also strengthens that unity.

**Read 2 Corinthians 9:8–15.** What does Paul say will be the results of the generosity revealed by the church at Corinth?

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The experience of unity in the early church shows us what can still be done today. Unity, however, did not happen without intentional commitment on the part of all believers. The leaders of the early community saw it as their ministry to foster unity in Christ. As love between husband and wife and children is a commitment that must be intentionally fostered every day, so is unity among believers. The unity we have in Christ is both encouraged and made visible in a number of ways.

The obvious elements that fostered this unity in the early church were prayer, worship, fellowship, a common vision, and the study of God's Word. Not only did they understand their mission to preach the gospel to all nations, but they also realized that they had a responsibility of love and care toward each other. Their unity manifested itself in their generosity and mutual support within their own local fellowships, and more broadly, between church communities, even if long distances separated them.

"Their benevolence testified that they had not received the grace of God in vain. What could produce such liberality but the sanctification of the Spirit? In the eyes of believers and unbelievers it was a miracle of grace."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 344.

**In what ways have you and your church experienced the benefits of generosity toward others? That is, what blessings come to those who give to others?**

**Further Thought:** Ellen G. White, “Pentecost,” pp. 35–46, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“This liberality on the part of the believers [in Acts 2:44, 45 and 4:32–35] was the result of the outpouring of the Spirit. The converts to the gospel were ‘of one heart and of one soul.’ One common interest controlled them—the success of the mission entrusted to them; and covetousness had no place in their lives. Their love for their brethren and the cause they had espoused was greater than their love of money and possessions. Their works testified that they accounted the souls of men of higher value than earthly wealth.

“Thus it will ever be when the Spirit of God takes possession of the life. Those whose hearts are filled with the love of Christ will follow the example of Him who for our sake became poor, that through His poverty we might be made rich. Money, time, influence—all the gifts they have received from God’s hand, they will value only as a means of advancing the work of the gospel. Thus it was in the early church; and when in the church of today it is seen that by the power of the Spirit the members have taken their affections from the things of the world, and that they are willing to make sacrifices in order that their fellow men may hear the gospel, the truths proclaimed will have a powerful influence upon the hearers.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 70, 71.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read over the factors from this week’s lesson that helped create the unity that the early church had experienced. How can we, as a church today, do similar things? That is, what might we be lacking in contrast to what was taking place among those believers at that time?
- 2 How is the example of these early New Testament churches giving a generous offering to help the poor in Jerusalem an example of what we should do today? How about other social issues? How can local churches be involved in their communities in order to alleviate poverty and supply other basic needs?
- 3 What are some lessons we can take away from the sad story of Ananias and Sapphira? What is the importance of the phrase found in Acts 5:5 and 5:11 about the “great fear” that came upon the church in regard to these two deaths?

**Summary:** The early church experienced rapid growth because Jesus’ disciples intentionally prepared themselves for the outpouring of the promised Holy Spirit. Their fellowship and common faith were the means used by the Holy Spirit to prepare their hearts for Pentecost. After Pentecost the Holy Spirit continued to transform this new community, as is manifested in their generosity toward each other and the rapid growth of the church.

## From Rocker to Doctor

By VYACHESLAV KOSHKODAN

At the age of 16, I was a rocker who listened to Nirvana and Metallica, had long hair, and wore torn clothing. I spent my nights at a dance hall, drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana in my small hometown in the former Soviet republic of Moldova.

Then a Seventh-day Adventist church member took an interest in me. He didn't condemn me, but instead spoke about his love for Jesus. He often asked me, "Have you read the Bible?"

After a while, I began to wonder why this guy wanted me to read the Bible. One evening I took a Bible with me to the dance hall and began to read. It was like a fairy tale to me, and I didn't take it seriously. But I kept reading, and something strange happened. My life began to change. Things that I once liked were no longer exciting to me. One night I looked around the dance floor and thought, *What are you doing here?* I went home and never returned.

At home, I continued reading the Bible. I asked the church member many questions, and I began to keep the Sabbath.

Soon I enrolled in the university to study medicine in Moldova's capital, Chişinău. We had classes six days a week, Monday through Saturday, but I told the dean that I couldn't study on Saturday. He replied that I should change my major.

At home, I fell on my knees and prayed, "God, if You want me to become a doctor, help me at school." As I prayed, the idea came to me to speak directly to the teacher who taught the Saturday classes. I told him about my beliefs, and he gave permission for me to make up my schoolwork on another day.

When I graduated six years later, my classmates looked at me with respect. They said, "You came to classes only five days a week, but you have better marks than we do. How is that possible?"

I told them, "I am learning from God, and He is my teacher." But really, God is more than my teacher. He has made me into a new person.



Today, I'm 33 and the father of three. In addition to being a physician, I'm a pastor and the health director for the Adventist Church in Moldova.

Anything is possible with Jesus. If Jesus could change me, He can change anyone.

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*Part of the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in fourth quarter 2017 helped turn a Soviet-era health resort into a Pathfinder camp and conference center in Moldova. Thank you for your mission offerings.*