

Bible Studies for Adventists



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June 13–19, 2009

Commentary on “Community”

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Day 1: Sabbath Afternoon, June 13, 2009

Overview

“Throughout the Bible, God has had a chosen people. In the Old Testament, it was the Israelites. In the New Testament, it was the early church. Today, we are God’s chosen people. And we have the responsibility of being good stewards of God’s church. How are we living up to that responsibility?” (From Teacher Comments, “The Lesson in Brief” section.)

Problems

The quarterly itself offers a good start. Excellent texts were chosen to be read in this first section. Although it might seem a bit obtuse to include Genesis 11 as a starting point for a study of church, the author does a nice job of contrasting it with Abram’s call in Genesis 12 (see Sunday’s lesson).

The problem comes in the section I quoted from the Teacher Comments. Clearly, the teacher is not to allow a discussion of what it means to be the body of Christ, but to steer the class towards the Adventist position – “Today, we are God’s chosen people.” In the context of this quarterly, “we” can mean only the Seventh-day Adventist church. Therefore, “they” (all other church goers who are not members of the Adventist church) cannot be God’s chosen people. Without saying it directly, the author has equated salvation with membership in a specific church.

The tragedy of this view—denominational exclusivity—is that it prevents rather than encourages the very things this week’s lesson purports to teach. Worse, it has absolutely no support Biblically.

A person is a member of the Body of Christ solely as a result of his or her acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior. “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13 NASB). Note that the baptism referred to is not water baptism, which is a wonderful public metaphor for an internal reality, but baptism by the Holy Spirit, which is the internal reality.

In answer to similar false claims by Judaizers in Ephesus, Paul wrote the following: “...to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel...” (Ephesians 3:6 NASB). In short, there is not a Jewish body and a Gentile body, or an Adventist body and a non-Adventist body, but only one body, the church (the *ecclesia*, or “called out ones”).

Therefore, the Body of Christ has nothing to do with denominations. Every child of God, regardless of denomination, is a member of His Body. This is the true church and the source of true community.

Summary

1. This could have been a good introduction to the Body of Christ
2. It was spoiled by an appeal to Seventh-day Adventism’s claim of being the only true spiritual Israel (and everything that means in relation to the Law).
3. The Bible is very clear that nationality, status, gender, organizational membership, etc. has no bearing on one’s identity as a Child of God and, therefore, a member of His church. Rather, all saved people, that is, people baptized by the Holy Spirit, are members of the true church.

Day 2: Sunday, June 14, 2009

Overview

“God adds, “‘I will make your name great’” (Genesis 12:2, NIV). Notice God’s ultimate objective in making of Abraham a great nation: “‘All peoples on the earth will be blessed through you’” (vs. 3, NIV). God created communities of faith truly are designed to bless the world... How can we, spiritual Israel, live up to our favored status?” (From Teacher Comments – “1. God Wants a People” section)

Problems

Again, this part of the lesson begins well. The contrast between the Tower of Babel and Abram’s call is quite useful. There truly is a stark difference between human initiatives to God and God’s initiative to us.

However, instead of following through with this good beginning, the Teacher Comments drive the instructor, and therefore the class, back into behaviorism based on the SDA church being spiritual Israel.

God’s promise to Abram was that Jesus would come through his lineage. Jesus is the blessing, not communities of faith, even God-designed ones.

This is a consistent theme throughout this lesson. Your job, as members of the SDA church, is to be a blessing to the world.

God doesn’t “want” a people. He is not waiting, with baited breath, in heaven for a group of folks to represent Him properly to the rest of the world. He wants individuals who respond to Him.

God initiated the blessing to the world. He sent Jesus, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8) to remove sin as the cause of separation between man and God and to offer eternal life to all who believe. Note how Jesus is described in Revelation 5: “And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth” (verses 9-10).

Our sole responsibility is to respond to this incredible God. Our initial response to accept His salvation makes us, by definition, members of His church. Our ongoing response allows His love to flow through us to others. He is always the blessing. We are never the blessing, but merely vessels overflowing to the world around us.

Summary

1. Babel contrasted with God’s call to Abram is a good place to start talking about the privilege of being a child of God and member of His church.
2. This good beginning is ruined by the belief that communities of faith are designed to bless the world.
3. God does not work through groups of people. He works through you and me.
4. Blessing is always the result of God’s initiative to us.
5. Our role is to respond to His initiative.

Day 3: Monday, June 15, 2009

Overview

“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.

Problems

This section never really talks about the privilege of belonging to Christ’s body.

“...who became a part...” Again, there is a complete focus on what a person does, rather than who a person is based upon Whose that person is. Brunt equates being a saint with becoming a part of the community of faith. I think he completely misses the point that “anyone called and set apart by God” is already a member, by definition, of God’s church and, therefore, a member of the community of faith.

But, for an Adventist, their community of faith is everything. Their arguments are exactly the same as the Judaizers of old; only the means are different. They contrast their “community” with all others, calling themselves the true “spiritual Israel” because they claim to keep The Law. They don’t keep the latter any better than anyone else, so, therefore, they cannot be the former.

Instead of really focusing on the incredible privilege of belonging to the body of Christ, they ask questions like this (from the Teacher's Comments): "How should a church respond to members who make moral or ethical mistakes?"

All discussion in this part of the lesson revolves around membership in the local body. We simply are not called to compare ourselves to others (i.e. how do you fit in with your local body). We are called to walk by faith in what Jesus has accomplished in us and to respond to His leading in our lives. He is the one, through the Holy Spirit, who gives the gifts and fits us together for His purposes. To ask "how do I fit in" is to fall into exactly the same trap as the Corinthians created for themselves.

It is not a church organization's role, either locally or on the wider stage, to usurp the Holy Spirit's role. We are not to carry around a clip board with a checklist of "body parts" we need to be successful congregations. Instead, we ask God to reveal to us how He wants to use this particular collection of "body parts" to serve humanity to His honor and glory.

Summary

1. Children of God are saints by definition, not by membership.
2. Paul's discussion of "body parts" in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 is intended to stop the comparisons we humans naturally make when walking in the flesh rather than walking in the Spirit.
3. The incredible privilege of belonging to Jesus Christ is that we can rest in the full knowledge that the Spirit equips and uses us in ways that fit each of us perfectly and reflect God's love and grace to the world.

Day 4: Tuesday, June 16, 2009

Overview

"The Ephesian believers to whom Paul addresses his letter were normal, everyday folk who had come to know Christ as Savior and were learning how to make Him Lord of their lives. In Ephesians 4:1–13, the apostle Paul implores them to "live a life worthy of the calling" (vs. 1, NIV) they have received by being patient, gentle, unified, prayerful, humble, and accepting of the roles assigned them by God. Paul rightly understood that to "prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (vs. 12, NIV), required a spirit of sacrifice. This spirit of sacrifice was one way of preparing God's people for "works of service" (Ephesians 4:12, NIV). (Teacher's Comments for this section)

Problems

Ephesians 3 ends with one of the greatest prayers in the entire Bible. Paul asks for five things on behalf of the people:

1. to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; 2) that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith;
2. that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth;
3. to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge; and
4. that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God (See Ephesians 3:16-19 NASB).

He ends the prayer thus: "Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen" (Ephesians 3:20-21).

This prayer is the preamble to his encouragement to the Ephesians beginning in Chapter 4. He is exhorting them to take their salvation seriously. Why? Not only will God make real in their hearts the very things Paul prayed for, but God also has blessed the church, His body, with incredible gifts – "given according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Ephesians 4:7).

In Paul's mind, everything is focused on Jesus Christ. Jesus is the source of our forgiveness and salvation. He is the source of love and the Giver of gifts. All the so-called responsibilities listed by this lesson's author are instead gifts to be made real in his reader's lives. Yes, they were to take this seriously. Yes, they had much to unlearn, from both their Jewish and pagan backgrounds. But the impetus for everything was the indwelling Holy Spirit. It was grace (the very presence of God enabling them to be who God had called them to be and to do what God had called them to do—see Philippians 2:13) teaching them to say No to ungodliness (Titus 2:11-14), not the Law.

These people were not "learning how to make Him Lord of their lives." He already was Lord of their lives. They were not required to have a "spirit of sacrifice" in order to attain behavioral goals. Rather, these things would be granted "according to the riches of His glory" (Ephesians 3:16). Paul encouraged them to excel in such things as humility, gentleness, patience, etc. not in order become better people, but because these things already were theirs in Christ. In other words, because they already were saints of the Most High God, they were to allow the Holy Spirit to work out of them towards others what He had already worked into them.

The responsibility of belonging is not a responsibility to do the right things, but a responsibility to walk by faith, radically trusting the indwelling Christ to be not only the Author but the Finisher of their faith.

Summary

1. Behaviorists have no choice but to interpret the various lists in the New Testament letters as collections of do's and don'ts. They must interpret them as extensions of the Law.
2. Paul saw it differently. He allowed the Law to do what it was meant to do, show a person his or her utter helplessness and to point that person to Jesus. Once the Law has done that, it ceases to be of any benefit.
3. We are called to walk by faith, not sight. It is now grace that leads us through our lives, not Law.
4. Nowhere is this more important than in our lives together as children of God. We still live in our unregenerate flesh which is subject to indwelling sin. We can be tempted. We too often fall. We hurt each other. But because of the super-abounding grace of God in the person of the Holy Spirit we who are led by the Spirit no longer need to carry out the desires of the flesh (see Galatians 5:16).
5. Carrying out the responsibility to love each other as Jesus first loved us is impossible under the Law, any law. It can be realized only by learning to listen to the Holy Spirit living within.

Day 5: Wednesday, June 17, 2009

Overview

"To be united in Christ means to be united in the truth. Christ defined Himself as the Truth."

Problems

Seriously, this may be the best written section of the entire lesson. I believe it should have been Monday's lesson. (Sunday's lesson should have been this quarterly's Thursday lesson, but more about that later.)

I absolutely agree that the only source of unity among Christians is Jesus. The vast majority of what divides the various denominations and their members from everyone else amounts to what Paul described in Philippians 3:8 as dung or refuse to be thrown away compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ.

How can this lesson, or any other lesson written by any other church, talk about the idea of community while trapped in the mire of denominational exclusiveness?! When is Seventh-day Adventism going to quit worshiping at the idol originally erected by the Catholic Church? When is Seventh-day Adventism going to once and for all recant of all the "distinctives" that make it so cult-like?

Surely, Jesus is not divided. Surely, Jesus is more important than the 2300 Days, the prototypical Day of Atonement, Ellen G. White, the Sabbath (as taught by Adventists), and the like. Surely, freedom is better than bondage, faith is better than works, grace is better than law.

I pray that all of those trapped in denominationalism, regardless of its man-made designation, will allow the Holy Spirit to lead them into the complete assurance and overwhelming peace of knowing Jesus, and only Jesus. I fear that far too many will hear, "I never knew you," when they try to drag all the wood, hay and stubble of their dead works into heaven.

Summary

- To think; perchance, to dream...

Day 6: Thursday, June 18, 2009

Overview

"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."

Problems

This should have been Sunday's lesson. Alas, it should have been written very differently.

The author of this lesson simply cannot conceive of the church as anything other than the Adventist denomination. It is not "our" church or God's "church". WE ARE THE CHURCH! There is nothing more and nothing less. Christ is the head; we are the body. Period.

I was told back in the late 1970's that an organizational guru took a look at General Motors. One of his conclusions: The bureaucracy of the company would last for months, even if the company itself ceased to exist. This story was told mostly as a joke, and we all laughed appropriately. Based on today's headlines, it appears that the joke really was a prophecy. A once great company has been reduced to government hand-outs and the bankruptcy courts, and, apparently, its bureaucracy ran for years in spite of all the warning signs that there was serious trouble brewing.

I can't help but think the same thing of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Organizations are necessary evils, given the propensity of human beings to run amok, but the organization is most assuredly not the church. Once the organization begins to think of itself as the definition of church, its demise is assured.

On the other hand (and this is where the author tries to go, albeit with the wrong definition), if this week's lesson had begun with Jesus, the Head of the body, then it would have laid an unshakeable foundation (please forgive the mixed metaphor) for the rest of the week.

All of the verses chosen are appropriate to the topic. They could have been used very effectively. Instead, that bad definition got in the way. And then, the Teacher's Comments section limited itself to a Mrs. White quotation, the final nail in the coffin of human origin.

Summary

1. Truly, Jesus is the one and only Foundation of the church. This should have been the foundation for this week's entire study.
2. Just as truly, the Adventist denomination is not the church the New Testament writers defined.

Day 7: Friday, June 19, 2009

Overview

"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."

Problems

One more time...

It appears that the very last place the Adventist denomination wants its members to look regarding the nature of the church, its functions, its roles and its source of authority is the Bible. Clearly, the Bible isn't enough, nor can the Holy Spirit be trusted to teach the meaning of the passages to the honest seeker after truth.

Instead, one needs an "Adventist study" and Chapter 45 of *The Desire of Ages*. The only purpose for suggesting these sources is the need to maintain control of the people who show up every week. There must be one answer, and that answer must be the Adventist answer.

If this isn't Catholicism, I don't know what is.

Again, this isn't limited to Seventh-day Adventist thinking. Every denomination I've studied carries the same illogic in its very genes.

There is a unique weakness that afflicts humans: the need to be right. I suffer from it, and so do you. This weakness is particularly damning in a religious setting. More blood has been spilled over the need to be right than for any other reason. We're so driven by this need that we're willing to kill people over it.

Do I fault the Adventist church for displaying this weakness? No. I fault them for refusing to believe it could be a weakness.

If the Adventist church is anything like other denominations, it is filled with people who are lost, people who are saved and people who don't know. This is normal. The answer is Jesus, not the denomination. The source book is the Bible (*sola scriptura*), not Ellen White. The Revealer of the Bible's meaning is the Holy Spirit; not me, not you, and certainly not an organization.

Summary

- Until we get this straight the saved people among us will never quite understand the abundant life Jesus promised, the lost people will never come to Jesus for salvation, and the confused will die in their unbelief, because an impersonal organization will never find a way to explain the intimately personal Jesus to them.