

Church Organization *and* Unity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 5:23–27; Matt. 20:25–28; Titus 1:9; Matt. 16:19; Gal. 6:1, 2; Matt. 28:18–20.*

Memory Text: “Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave”
(Matthew 20:26, 27, NKJV).

As Seventh-day Adventists, we are Protestant Christians who believe that salvation is through faith alone in what Jesus Christ has accomplished for humanity. We do not need a church or a church hierarchy in order to receive the benefits of what Christ has done for us. What we get from Christ we get directly from Him, as our Substitute on the cross and as our mediating High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary.

Nevertheless, the church is God's creation, and God placed it here for us, not as a means of salvation but as a vehicle to help us express and make manifest that salvation to the world. The church is an organization that Jesus created for the spreading of the gospel into the world. Organization is important insofar as it solidifies and enables the mission of the church. Without a church organization, Jesus' saving message could not as effectively be communicated to others. Church leaders are important, too, in that they foster unity and exemplify the example of Jesus.

This week we study why church organization is crucial for mission and how it can foster church unity.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 22.

Christ, the Head of the Church

As we have seen already in an earlier lesson, in the New Testament the church is represented by the metaphor of a body. The church is the body of Christ. This metaphor alludes to several aspects of the church and the relationship between Christ and His people. As the body of Christ, the church depends on Him for its very existence. He is the Head (*Col. 1:18, Eph. 1:22*) and the Source of the life of the church. Without Him there would be no church.

The church also derives its identity from Christ, for He is the Source and the Foundation and the Originator of its belief and teachings. Yet, the church is more than these things, as crucial as they are to its identity. It is Christ and His Word as revealed in Scripture that determine what the church is. Thus, the church derives its identity and significance from Christ.

In Ephesians 5:23–27, Paul uses the relationship between Christ and His church to illustrate the kind of relationship there should be between husband and wife. What are the key ideas of this relationship between Christ and His church?

Although we may be hesitant with the concept of submission because of how leaders in the centuries past have abused it, the church is nonetheless to be subject to the Head, Christ, and is subject to His authority. Our acknowledgment of Christ as the Head of the church helps us remember to whom our ultimate allegiance must belong, and that is the Lord Himself and to no one else. The church is to be organized, but that organization always must be subordinate to the authority of Jesus, the true Leader of our church.

“The church is built upon Christ as its foundation; it is to obey Christ as its head. It is not to depend upon man, or be controlled by man. Many claim that a position of trust in the church gives them authority to dictate what other men shall believe and what they shall do. This claim God does not sanction. The Saviour declares, ‘All ye are brethren.’ All are exposed to temptation, and are liable to error. Upon no finite being can we depend for guidance. The Rock of faith is the living presence of Christ in the church. Upon this the weakest may depend, and those who think themselves the strongest will prove to be the weakest, unless they make Christ their efficiency.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 414.

How can we learn to depend upon Christ and not upon any “finite being,” as it is so easy to do?

Servant Leadership

During His ministry with His disciples, Jesus repeatedly experienced moments when He probably felt exasperated by the envy for power they seemed to have. The apostles appeared to be anxious to become powerful leaders of Jesus' kingdom (*Mark 9:33, 34; Luke 9:46*). Even as the disciples were eating the Last Supper together, these feelings of domination and supremacy were palpably felt among them (*Luke 22:24*).

During one such occasion, Jesus clearly expressed His thoughts regarding spiritual leadership among His people. What principles of leadership do we learn from Jesus' exhortation in Matthew 20:25–28? How can we manifest this principle in our lives and especially in our churches?

“In this concise passage Jesus presents us with two models of authority. The first is the Roman idea of authority. In this model, the elite stand hierarchically over others. They have the power to make decisions and expect submission from those below them. Jesus clearly rejected this model of authority when He stated, ‘Not so with you!’ Instead He presented the disciples with a breathtakingly new model of authority, a thorough rejection, or reversal, of the hierarchical model with which they were familiar.”—Darius Jankiewicz, “Serving Like Jesus: Authority in God’s Church,” *Adventist Review*, March 13, 2014, p. 18.

The concept of authority that Jesus presents in this story is based on two key words: “servant” (*diakonos*) and “slave” (*doulos*). In some Bible versions, the first word, “servant,” is often translated “minister,” and the second, “servant” or “bondservant.” Both words thus lose much of the force of Jesus’ intent. Although Jesus did not wish to abolish all authority structures, what He wished to emphasize is that church leaders must first of all be servants and slaves of God’s people. Their positions are not to exercise authority over people or to dominate them or to give themselves prestige and reputation. “Christ was establishing a kingdom on different principles. He called men, not to authority, but to service, the strong to bear the infirmities of the weak. Power, position, talent, education, placed their possessor under the greater obligation to serve his fellows.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 550.

Read John 13:1–20. What example of leadership did Jesus give His disciples? What is Jesus still trying to teach us in this passage? How can we manifest the principle here in all our actions with others, in and outside of the church?

Preserving Church Unity

Read 2 Timothy 2:15 and Titus 1:9. According to Paul’s counsels to Timothy and Titus, what crucial tasks are the responsibility of a faithful church leader and elder?

Notice how much emphasis Paul puts on keeping the doctrines and teachings pure. This is crucial for unity, especially because one could argue that, more than anything else, our teachings are what unify our church. Again, as Adventists, as people from so many different walks of life, cultures, and backgrounds, our unity in Christ is found in our understanding of the truth that Christ has given. If we get confused on these teachings, then only chaos and division will come, especially as we near the end.

“I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (2 Tim. 4:1–4, NKJV).

With these words, Paul focuses his inspired thoughts on the second coming of Jesus and on the day of judgment. The apostle uses all his God-given authority (see 1 Tim. 1:1) to give Timothy this important counsel. In the context of the last days, with false teachings abounding and immorality rising, Timothy is to preach the Word of God. That is the ministry he has been called to.

As part of his teaching ministry, Timothy is to convince, rebuke, and exhort. These verbs are reminiscent of the guidance given by the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16). Clearly, Timothy’s work is to follow, teach, and implement what he finds in the Scriptures and to do so with long-suffering and patience. Harsh and severe rebukes rarely bring a sinner to Christ. By following what Paul wrote, and following it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and with a servant-leader attitude, Timothy would be a powerfully unifying force in the church.

What are practical ways that we can help our church leaders maintain unity in the church? How can we make sure we are always a force for unity as opposed to disunity, even amid disputes?

Church Discipline

One of the main issues of church organization is to deal with discipline. How discipline helps to preserve church unity is sometimes a touchy subject and easily may be misunderstood. But from a biblical perspective, church discipline centers on two important areas: preserving purity of doctrine and preserving purity of church life and practice.

As we already have seen, the New Testament maintains the importance of preserving the purity of biblical teaching in the wake of apostasy and false teaching, particularly at the end of time. The same goes for preserving the respectability of the community by guarding against immorality, dishonesty, and depravity. For this reason the Scripture is spoken of as “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 *Tim.* 3:16, *NKJV*).

Read Matthew 16:19 and 18:15–20. What principles did Jesus give to the church regarding discipline and admonishing those who are at fault?

The Bible supports the concept of discipline and of our accountability to each other in our spiritual and moral lives. In fact, one of the distinguishing marks of the church is its holiness, or separation, from the world. We certainly find in the Bible many examples of difficult situations that required the church to act decisively against immoral behaviors. Moral standards must be maintained in the church.

What principles do these passages teach us to follow when addressing difficult issues in the church? *Matt.* 7:1–5; *Gal.* 6:1, 2.

We cannot deny the biblical teaching about the need of church discipline. We cannot be faithful to the Word without it. But notice the redemptive quality in many of these admonitions. As much as possible, discipline should be redemptive. We need to remember, too, that we are all sinners and that we all need grace. Thus, when we administer discipline we need to do it in humility and with a keen awareness of our own failings, as well.

In our dealings with those who err, how can we learn to act with an attitude of redemption more than of punishment?

Organizing for Mission

As we have seen throughout this quarter (and which bears repeating), as a church we have been organized and unified for mission, for outreach. We are not just a social club for like-minded people to get together and affirm each other in what we believe (though that can be important, as well). We have been brought together to share with the world the truth that we, ourselves, have come to love.

In Matthew 28:18–20, Jesus gave His disciples final instructions for their mission to the world. Identify the key words of Jesus’ command. What do these words imply for the church today?

Jesus’ great commission to His disciples includes four key verbs: go, make disciples, baptize, and teach. According to the Greek grammar of these verses, the main verb is to make disciples, and the other three verbs indicate how this can be done. Disciples are made when believers go to all nations to preach the gospel, baptize people, and teach them to observe what Jesus said.

As the church responds to this commission, God’s kingdom is enlarged, and more and more people of all nations join the ranks of those who accept Jesus as Savior. Their obedience to Jesus’ commands to be baptized and to observe His teachings creates a new universal family. The new disciples also are assured of the presence of Jesus every day as they themselves make more disciples. The presence of Jesus is a promise of the presence of God. The Gospel of Matthew begins with the announcement that the birth of Jesus is about “God with us” (*Matt. 1:23*) and ends with the promise of Jesus’ continued presence with us until His second coming.

“Christ did not tell His disciples that their work would be easy. . . . He assured them that He would be with them; and that if they would go forth in faith, they should move under the shield of Omnipotence. He bade them be brave and strong; for One mightier than angels would be in their ranks—the General of the armies of heaven. He made full provision for the prosecution of their work and took upon Himself the responsibility of its success. So long as they obeyed His word, and worked in connection with Him, they could not fail.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 29.

Reflect on the meaning of the promise of Jesus’ presence with His people until His second coming. How should the reality of this promise impact us as we seek to fulfill the commission that we have been given by Jesus?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “Individual Responsibility and Christian Unity,” pp. 485–505, in *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*; “Unity in Diversity,” pp. 483–485; “Church Discipline,” pp. 498–503, in *Gospel Workers*. Read the articles “Church,” pp. 707–710, and “Church Organization,” pp. 712–714, in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*.

“Principles of good leadership apply in all forms of society, including the church. However, the leader in the church must be more than a leader. He must also be a servant.

“There is an apparent contradiction between being a leader and being a servant. How can one lead and serve at the same time? Does not the leader occupy a position of honor? Does he not command and expect others to obey him? How, then, does he occupy the lower position of being a servant, of receiving orders and fulfilling them?

“In order to resolve the paradox we must look at Jesus. He supremely represented the principle of leadership that serves. His whole life was one of service. And at the same time He was the greatest leader the world has ever seen.”—G. Arthur Keough, *Our Church Today: What It Is and Can Be* (Washington, D.C., and Nashville: Review and Herald, 1980), p. 106.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell more on the idea of a servant leader. What, if any, examples, can we find of this in the secular world?
- 2 Read again Matthew 20:25–28. What does this tell us about how God understands the meaning of the word “great” (*Matt. 20:26*) in contrast to how the word is understood by the world?
- 3 If one of the tasks of church leaders is to preserve unity, what should we do when church leaders falter, when their humanity prevents them from being perfect examples?
- 4 Why is it so important that we administer church discipline with a spirit of graciousness and love toward the ones who are erring? Why should Matthew 7:12 always be foremost in our minds during the process?

Summary: Good church organization is essential to the mission of the church and to the unity of believers. Christ is the Head of the church, and church leaders are to follow His example as they lead the people of God. Unity is preserved through the faithful teaching of the Word of God and by living in faithfulness to that Word.

My Wife Left Church

By DANIEL GATAN

My wife has stopped attending the Seventh-day Adventist Church, but I have not given up hope. Here's why.

During repressive Communist times, a woman in my home country, Romania, learned about the Adventist Church and began to attend Sabbath services regularly. This infuriated her husband.

"Where are you going at the same time every Saturday?" he asked.

"Honey, I am going to the Adventist church," she said.

"I already know that," he snapped. "You can keep going, but on one condition: You cannot be baptized. I don't want to hear that you've been baptized, or I'll kill you."

As the woman read the Bible and learned more about Jesus, she became convicted that she needed to take a public stand for Jesus through baptism.

Church members surrounded the newly baptized people after the Sabbath ceremony. They offered hugs and colorful flowers. Everyone was smiling except for one woman. She wasn't sure how her husband would react.

That afternoon, she found her husband in the front yard when she returned home with flowers in her arms. He was sitting at a wooden table with a sharp knife sticking out of the top.

"Where are the flowers from?" he asked.

"I was baptized today," she replied.

His face turned purple with rage.

"Did you not believe me when I told you that I would kill you if you were baptized?" he said, pulling the knife out of the tabletop. "Get ready to die," he said and lunged at her.

His wife fled to the back of the house, where the couple had a garden. Her husband caught up to her in the cornstalks. As he raised the knife over his head, the woman begged for one last wish: to pray. The husband agreed and watched as his wife knelt. He loomed over her as she spoke to God, holding the knife high above his head.

Suddenly, the knife blade silently slid out of the handle and fell harmlessly to the ground. The man's face turned pale. His whole body began to tremble, and he fell to the ground beside the blade. His wife jumped to her feet and helped him up. Wordlessly, they went into the house.

After some time, the husband was baptized. God changed his heart.

If God can change this man's heart, I know He also can touch my wife's heart. I can trust in God even when all hope seems lost.



DANIEL GATAN, 68, is a retired construction worker from Plosca, Romania.