

Sabbath School Lesson #5 – Experience of Unity in Early Church – 27 Oct-2 Nov 2018

Christ would have us accept Him as our Lord and Saviour so that we may share in the experience of unity manifest in the early church. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). To have unity with one another as Christians, we must individually be united to Christ.

To thus be united to Christ and by the means of Christ’s life to each other, means to accept Christ in the fullest sense. To accept Christ as a Saviour, a redeemer, a way of life, *an example, or a teacher, will not suffice.* He declares, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). To accept Christ as *the Way* is to give up all our ways and yield all, willingly (He will never compel), to His way. “Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he can not be My disciple” (Luke 14:33).

To accept Jesus Christ as *the Truth*, means to accept the Word of God, as God’s message through Christ to this world. For Christ is the Word, the one through whom all the Word was given (John 1:1-3; 1 Corinthians 8:6). It was His power that created all things; it was His own Spirit which spake through the prophets (Colossians 1:16; 1 Peter 1:10-11). He it is who has in all times and ages declared the Father to the children of men, whether as the Angel of the Covenant, the Pillar of Cloud and Fire, the exhaustless Rock-fountain in the desert, the Man Christ Jesus in Judea, the Inspirer of the Holy Writings, or the Sender of the Comforter – His own Spirit (for the Father sends to us the Spirit of His Son – see Galatians 4:6). The Holy Word, with its one law and one Gospel, its one Spirit and one object, is the message of God through Jesus Christ to the sons of men. So Christ prays of those whom He would make one, “Sanctify them through thy truth; thy Word is truth;” for by that Word was he sanctified, “that they also might be sanctified through the truth” (John 17:17-19).

He therefore who receives Christ, the Truth, will receive His Word in law and Gospel, in precept and promise, with all the heart. No tradition will make void in his heart the law of God render vain his worship (Matthew 15:6, 9). No sophistry of man will be allowed to nail upon the cold, dead, irresponsible arms of a cruel creed (or a manual) the life-giving truths of that Word. He who truly accepts Christ will take the Word of Christ into his heart, and there let its vital principles live and grow, fashioning him day by day like the Master. That Word will be the Christ revealed in writing. And Christ will truly be that Word revealed in character.

He who receives Jesus Christ as the Life will not cut off the life which is in Him by the old serpent fable of Eden, “Thou shalt not surely die.” In the light of God’s presence in His Word the humble soul will acknowledge his sinfulness, and thereby his mortality, and look to Jesus Christ alone as the Source of righteousness and eternal life to the believer now, the Bestower of immortality at His coming. The experience of early church can be ours today.

Acceptance of Christ does not mean that all Christ’s fullness must be seen if we are to become one in Him; for that can never be, because He is infinite. But it does mean that the believer is to accept Jesus Christ as He is, as He is revealed in His Word. He must allow no civil magistrate, no mitered priest, no human creed or council, no worldly ambition, no arts of the evil one, to come between his soul and Jesus Christ, and he will leave to prayer, study, experience, and the goodness and wisdom of Christ, to supply the fuller knowledge.

Thus accepting Christ made the early church what it was, united in heart and purpose, in word and doctrine, in worship, in life. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship;” “and the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul; ... and with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus; and great grace was upon them all.” Thus it was in that early church. How precious to them were the truths and hopes of the resurrection, the second coming of Christ, the atonement in its fullest and strongest sense, the power of the Spirit of Christ in those days!

Let us return to the text: “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42 – read also verses 46, 47). We see that this breaking of bread was both in the temple and at home, and, moreover, it was to the disciples a token of fellowship. The question arises: With whom was the fellowship? Some will say at once that it was fellowship with the apostles; but a little study will show that it was fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ that the disciples enjoyed.

"That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship *is* with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). Here it is made very plain that "our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." Without this, all human fellowship is nothing. Again: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion [fellowship] of the blood of Christ? The bread, which we break, is it not the communion [fellowship] of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body; for we are all partakers of that one Bread" (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

Do not misunderstand the statement that they continued "in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship." It is the same as in 1 John 1:3: "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ." "Fellowship with us" means the same fellowship that the apostles had, namely, "with the Father and with His Son." We are "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Ephesians 2:20); not on the apostles and prophets, but on the foundation on which they built and were built – the foundation is Jesus, laid in Zion by God.

Clearly the new converts had fellowship "with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ," and we note the fact that the breaking of bread had a close connection with this fellowship. Indeed, as stated in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, the breaking of bread is the indication of that fellowship. Christ is the bread of life (John 6:48), and we, by feeding upon Him, become one bread with Him. It is said of the disciples that "breaking bread at home, they did eat their food with gladness and singleness of heart." Note that the breaking of bread at home was as much a religious matter with them, and contributed as much to their gladness, as breaking bread in the synagogue or the temple. Why? Because they had learned from the Lord Jesus that the food which He gives us to eat contains His life; and that, as we live by eating, if we eat in faith discerning His body, we shall live by faith, being partakers of His righteousness.

This breaking of bread is mentioned in connection with the fact that "all that believed were together, and had all things common" (Acts 2:44). Those who believe in the true Father and His Son, having perfect fellowship, can do this; for they know that they have nothing of their own, and that He who from His own life supplies their wants, belongs equally to others. They have no table of their own, but eat continually from the Lord's table. He prepares a table for us, and we are fed daily by His hand. Consequently, when we give to our needy brother, we are simply doing what we might do if we were both dining at a rich man's table, – we might pass the food to some one with an empty plate. If we look at the matter in this light, it will affect us in two ways: it will cure us of selfishness, – the tendency to seize food from the table and go into a corner and eat it by ourselves, – and also cure us of the false pride which makes us feel ashamed if it is necessary for us to receive assistance through a fellow-man.

Another thing: When we continually recognise the fact that we are fed only from the Lord's table, our table will no longer be a snare to us, because when we eat and drink we shall do it to the glory of God; and this means health to us, since our welfare is God's glory. It is the Lord "Who satisfieth thy mouth with good *things*; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Psalms 103:4). We shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of God's house (Psalms 36:8), and nothing that does not tend to build up, nothing that is poisonous or that contains elements of decay, – will be eaten by us, simply because we like the taste of it.

"And fear came upon every soul" (Acts 2:43). Not the slavish fear that hath torment, but the fear of God, which is true wisdom. "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15). And yet the Spirit of the Lord, "the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord" is given us in Christ, to make us "of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord" (Isaiah 11:2-3). "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil" and "By the fear of the Lord men depart from evil" (Proverbs 8:13; 16:6).

Thus was the early church built and only thus can the true church of Christ ever be built. It is not built by human ideas of attracting un-churched communities into church. The house that is "builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:22), is "not made with hands" (2 Corinthians 5:1). Christ calls men out of the world to Himself, and adds them together. The whole body, knit together by joints and hands, and having nourishment ministered from Christ the Head, "increaseth with the increase of God" (Colossians 2:19).