

THE MISSION OF FELLOWSHIP

by

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*Adapted with permission from a message
delivered at PMC, Andrews University
1993*

Theme: Our families and our churches as families, when we allow God's Spirit to minister through us, have the opportunity and privilege of carrying out the fellowship aspect of mission.

Theme Text: Phil. 1:5; 1 John 1:7

Presentation Notes: Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses (1), (2), (3) will indicate items from the section called *Sermon Illumination* which may be used for illustration. The addition of your personal illustrations will enhance the presentation.

Recent research on church growth has shown that a church's understanding of itself and its role in mission critically affects its growth and advance. Right concepts of ourselves as God's people and of His commission lead to growth. False concepts of purpose and mission or narrow views of the biblical concept of mission impede progress. Examples from historical Adventism illustrate this.

"Shut door" to "open door." At the beginning, Adventist believers thought of themselves as an "ark with a shut door." Their mission was simply to encourage each other. Later, the Adventist Church came to see itself as "an open door to the world." Missionary endeavor developed accordingly. (1)

Doubts, debates and the challenge confronting Daniels. In the 1920's, when difficulties, doubts, debates, and questions about revelation and inspiration bred a decline in church growth, A. G. Daniels was asked by the General Conference to hold meetings and stimulate a new self-understanding. He reported that the prevailing idea of the church as a "little flock" presented considerable resistance to efforts to move the membership into missionary action. (2) This view, despite being based on a biblical metaphor, had resulted in a lopsided, limited perspective.

Similar challenges today. Today, despite considerable growth in our self-understanding and our mission, some three billion people have never even heard the name of Christ. Though more is involved in accomplishing mission than a proper self-understanding as a church, many are convinced we need to grow in this area of self-understanding so that the mission may advance. How shall we grow?

Our Image of the Church Shapes Our Mission

The New Testament uses many word images to describe the church, such as *truth, remnant, mountain, Zion, ship, sheep, body, people of God*. No one word can fully define the many aspects of what it means to be the church of God. Each image stands in need of being complemented and corrected by the others. Further, the church as *truth, remnant*, or as *little flock* needs to adapt and change when new circumstances arise in the world, so that it may be present truth, and respond to new challenges.

Our church, which once identified itself as the "warning message," is now coming to understand itself as a "caring church." It is not a matter of choosing between one image or another. Each image needs the other. One supports the other, compliments the other, corrects the other.

Proclamation of truth. Until now our Adventist Church has been guided by two or three typical, biblical images of the church. We have identified ourselves with the "truth" and see our mission as *proclamation of the truth*. While nothing should detract from this very biblical self-understanding of the church and its mission, which has had such an impact upon the world, there is more to mission than proclamation.

Service. We've also seen our mission as *service*; we've established many hospitals and clinics and schools and are increasingly engaged in technical development. We thank God for the progress, yet there is something very basic missing in our self-understanding as a church.

Fellowship. Mission is not only proclamation, be it in word, in publications, through the media. Nor is it only proclamation and service. A third characteristic is the hallmark of mission, the notion of *fellowship*. (3), (4)

Fellowship: Core of the Biblical Images of Church

Importance of fellowship shown by sociology. Sociologists tell us the greatest disease of modern humanity is alienation and utter loneliness. Families are breaking down; primary groups are breaking down; urbanization makes us just lonely individuals. The greatest need of humanity today is a new sense of belonging, a new sense of fellowship.

Biblical teaching about fellowship. Paul speaks of the church as a "fellowship in the gospel" (Phil. 1:5). The apostle John writes, "If we walk in the light as He is the light, we have fellowship with one another" (1 John 1:7, NKJV). Other images may not use the word, but emphasize the same thing. The church is compared to a human body (1 Cor. 12), with every member needing every other and linked to every other. When one receives honor all receive honor; when one of the members is hurting we are all hurting. That's the core of the fellowship.

This fellowship is the reflection of the relationship between the Father and the Son. The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' doctrine and to fellowship, says Acts 2:42. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. We don't read here of mighty evangelistic campaigns, as powerful as they are. We don't read here of establishing schools and hospitals, as important as they are. The reason for the growth of the early church was the fellowship of the believers.

When fellowship is missing. Often the church can be a place of insensitivity and great hurt rather than a place of fellowship. The presence or absence of fellowship is conveyed by our attitude and our behavior, in the way we greet one another, in our conversations with one another. How do we treat strangers among us? Do we take pains to create a feeling of fellowship? (5), (6)

Barriers to Fellowship

Why is it so difficult for many of us to accept this concept of the church as fellowship? Ellen White tells us that, because of the conditions of the people, God is holding His hand over the church so that not many people are joining (see 6T 371 and 9T 189). Among those conditions she describes, are lack of love and lack of fellowship. She indicates that many more people could have been baptized. That means that instead of the seven million membership we have now there could have been many millions.

Theological barriers. Our mission to proclaim truth has become almost sacred to us. It is a core

pillar of the Adventist mission, and I pray to God that it ever will remain so, but it is only one aspect of what it means to be the church in mission. The text (Acts 2:42) says, "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship . . ." They devoted themselves to Bible study, to the truth, and to fellowship. We need to see ourselves, not just as proclaimers, messengers of the truth (which we are) but also as people who are fellowshiping with their own kind, with their neighbors and even with their enemies. (7)

Cultural barriers. Often when we speak about fellowship we think of fun, having a good time, eating, laughing, but not doing things that pertain to God and the church. We have relegated the concept of fellowship to the social, that is, the secular realm of life, which is of a much lower nature than the spiritual. Again, this is an unbiblical division and the sooner we get rid of it the better. We must recognize that to be in fellowship with each other is a spiritual experience of great magnitude. The Psalmist constantly speaks about the joy of fellowshiping with the believers in the temple of God. The New Testament is full of this notion of fellowship as wholistic. Fellowship is at the very core of being a Christian.

To the extent that culture focuses on the individual; the fellowship of the group tends to become only an appendix. Cultural individualism tends to shape our Adventist theology, our church services, as well as our church buildings. When we enter the church we look only at each other's neck, when we look at each other we see only each other's neck, and when we leave the church we look at each other's neck again. Instead we should be looking each other in the eye and saying, "Brother how are you, sister how are you?" Our theology defines the church as a group of individuals meeting with God, instead of a communal feast, the celebration of the fellowship of the believers on the very day of fellowship.

Visiting: Making Fellowship a Reality

Let's start to overcome obstacles to fellowship by visiting each other. Let's speak to each other instead of speaking about each other. Let's eat and drink together. The greatest criticism of Jesus was that He ate and drank with sinners. But that was the very core of fellowshiping with people whom He loved.

Let's feast together, let's do things together. Ellen White describes the annual feasts among ancient Israel and indicates that it would be a good thing for us as a church to have such a celebration (see PP 540, 541). God knew what was good for the believers then, divided and separated into tribes as they were. All met together and slept together in little huts. Can you image what kind of forced fellowship it was? But it worked.⁸

Let us visit each other, let us speak with each other, let us eat together, let's do things together, let's feast together, let's meet in small groups for prayer and Bible study to see how we can advance the work. But above all, let our whole life be one fellowship with each other. It is as Scripture says, "If we walk in the Light, and He is the Light we have fellowship with each other" (1 John 1:7, NKJV). God bless you.

Sermon Illumination

One (1): Missions advance begins following the "open door." After the Great Disappointment of 1844, Adventists struggled with the questions, What are we here for now? What is our mission? At first they used the image of Noah's ark to define themselves and their purpose. The faithful few were safely hidden in the "ark." The Lord Himself had shut the door and now they were anxiously awaiting His return. James White defined their mission as "to encourage the

brethren of Laodicea." Thus they spoke only to themselves. There was no growth. No advance. Their framework for understanding seemed biblical, yet they were all too limited in their self-understanding. For them the door of salvation was shut, and nobody could be added. After a decade or so, following the guidance given by God to our church, we suddenly changed and grew in our self-understanding as a church and mission. In the 1850's James White defined the church as "an open door to the world." The church began to grow and its mission began to advance.

Two (2): "Little flock" notion stifles growth. At the first meeting Brother Daniels held, he said in effect, "If we had the right understanding of ourselves as a people and would act accordingly, millions would join this church and make preparations for the coming of Christ." Immediately after the meeting the brethren took him aside and rebuked him for what he had said, admonishing him, "Don't teach that heresy again." "What heresy?" he asked. "*Millions* of people would join," they said, "that is a wrong understanding; we are God's remnant; we are a little flock. '*Millions*' is a characteristic of Babylon. We, however, are only a small little flock who have chosen to go the narrow path, to go through the narrow gate."

Three (3), (4): Fellowship important to persons joining church. A study by the Southern Baptist Convention asked their new members from the last five years why they had joined. The leading reason: "We joined because we loved the fellowship in the Baptist churches." When that study was mentioned at a meeting of the administrative committee responsible for the growth of the Adventist church, the chairman commented, "Brethren, I'm so glad that this is not the case with the Seventh-day Adventist Church." He believed that people join the church because they love and hear the truth and that church mission is a matter of proclaiming the truth with clarity. The fact is that today people love this church not in the first place because of the truth, even though it is an essential pillar, but because of the fellowship. Recently the Southeastern California Conference asked new members of the last five years about their reasons for joining the Adventist church. The conference secretary reported, "Most of the people said, 'We were loved into the truth.'"

Five (5): Lack of fellowship contributes to apostasy. For every 100 members we bring into the Adventist church 40 leave and most of these do so within the first two years after their baptism. The Institute of World Mission conducted a study on why this is so. More than 2,000 former Adventists in North America and Europe were interviewed. Of those interviewed 70% reported, "We would have stayed in the church if there would have been a genuine fellowship among the believers."

Six (6): When fellowship is missing. Oosterwal: Not long ago my family and I went to a church where we were not known. We arrived early and sat down. When the service was about to begin a sister suddenly appeared in front of us and said, "That's my seat." If I hadn't been a long standing member of the Adventist church I would have left, never to come back. Recently a sister in one of our Adventist centers took her own life, leaving behind a note which began, "I have nobody . . ." How is it possible to be a member of an Adventist church for 22 years and end your life with the words, "I have nobody." How is it possible to be a member of a choir for 12 years and end your life with the words, "I have nobody."

Seven (7): Oosterwal's own story of the crucial importance of church fellowship. My mother was an Adventist and my father often went along, but I hated to go to church as a boy, for a

number of reasons. In the first place I couldn't play soccer, and all Dutch boys grow up playing soccer. I never could join the junior league and of course all my friends said, "Hey, Bobby (that was my name when I was young) when are you going to join the rest of us playing soccer?" The second reason was that we didn't have a church. We had no building, no tower, no organ, no choir, no minister with a beautiful robe. The little handful of church members in Rotterdam were meeting in the greasy basement of a bicycle repair shop. There was never a moment of quiet, all the time you heard the metal hitting metal. I hated to go there. On top of that, the building we used was located in the most run down part of that large port city. You can't imagine how that section of the city looked and smelled. And coming from a better part of town, I hated it.

At times I attended the Dutch Reformed churches of my friends. They were huge—with towers and organs, choirs, and reverent ministers with long robes. I sat in them with awe. And my friends would say, "Hey, Bobby, where do you go to church?"

I replied, "Don't worry, don't worry." I was so ashamed; I was angry.

One Saturday as we set off for church I spied some of my friends waiting for me behind the corner. School was closed that particular day and they wanted to follow me and see my church. Noticing them and guessing what they intended, I excused myself, "Momma, I better run on ahead." I started running as fast as I could. I could run very fast in those days, so I lost my friends across the railroad tracks. Every Sabbath after that I would watch to make sure my friends weren't watching. If they were, I'd say, "Bye bye, Momma," and I'd run to church. One Sabbath I overheard my mother say to a church sister, "Our Bobby loves to go to church. He can't wait for us, he's always running!"

But all that changed. The church became the center of my life. I found meaning here and the deepest fellowship that ever can be experienced by a human being. I know the day and I know the hour. The date was May 10, 1940, a Friday, when troops from Nazi Germany invaded the Netherlands. The Germans had used their crack paratroopers for the first time in the war, landing them in the southern part of Rotterdam where I lived, while the Dutch Marines were defending the bridges in the northern part of the city.

The battle raged from house to house—shooting, bombing. The next day was the Sabbath and as our family huddled in our basement, afraid of the bombs, mother began dressing my brother and my sister.

"What are you doing?" father asked.

"I'm dressing the children."

"I see that, but what for?"

Answered mother, "We are going to church."

My startled father stated, "Today? There's a war going on!" The paratroopers were firing a machine gun right in front of our house. Father sought to reason with her, "Not even a dog is outside. How can we go on the streets?"

My mother simply responded, "Today is the day of fellowship."

When she said "day of fellowship," something hit me right there and then as a young teenager.

You see the Sabbath is not only a great memorial to God's creative activity as in Exodus 20, but Deuteronomy 5 indicates that the Sabbath was given as a memorial of redemption, a memorial to the time when one nation was molded together. Once we were slaves, with divisions among us as human beings, divisions between slaves and masters, between tribes, between people of different races and ethnic groups. But the Lord has given us the Sabbath, so that we can celebrate the fellowship of the believers.

As we entered the street, a soldier, with hand grenades in his belt and a machine gun under his arm, confronted us.

"Halt, where are you going?"

"We're going to church."

He said, "Go back, go back, there's a war going on, there is shooting all the time."

My mother said, "No, we want to go to church."

Then he suddenly thought of something and said, "No, no, no, not today, tomorrow. Everybody is confused in the war."

"No, no," my mother said opening her Bible to Exodus 20. At that point he called in his sergeant. The sergeant said, "You better go home."

"Oh, no, we go to church today."

And he thought for a moment and said, "Jewish people."

"No, no," my mother said, knowing the love the Nazis had for the Jewish people, "we are Seventh-day Adventists. Look the Bible says" But that was too powerful for the sergeant, and so he called the lieutenant.

The lieutenant listened for awhile and, realizing what was in the minds of my parents, said, "Go, and may God be with you."

I'll not give here the details of how we crossed the front line between the Dutch Marines and the German Paratroopers. Some of us in the family are still bearing the scars. When we got to the greasy basement of the bicycle repair shop, without an organ, without a tower, the whole congregation was there. The bombs were falling and the grenades exploding, but the church was there. It was there because the very hallmark of the church is not the building, not the tower, but the fellowship of the believers. There was hugging and kissing. They did what the Bible says to do when you get together. Greet each other warmly. Hug, give each other a kiss, a kiss of love, or a holy kiss. I still see before me the hugging and the kissing and suddenly I felt so proud to be a Seventh-day Adventist.

We didn't have an organ or a tower, or a big building, only a greasy basement in a bicycle repair shop, but we were celebrating the very essence of what it means to be the church, we were a fellowship of believers. It was that fellowship that saw us through those five terrible years of the war when there was hunger and when people were taken captive and put into concentration camps. Some children lost their fathers but they had many other fathers because of the church. Some people lost mothers, but we had many mothers as long as we had sisters in the church. That's the core of being the church. As long as one member had some soap (and my mother had hoarded a lot of soap), then the whole church had soap. And as long as some people had bread or flour or sugar or salt, the whole church had bread and flour and sugar and salt. That is what saw us through.

Some who were teenagers then owe their lives to the fellowship of believers. When all the food was rationed to one quarter loaf of bread per family, some older Adventists came to our home and gave us their bread. Before the war was over these very people had collapsed in the street. Some of us can tell the story because we are alive and well because of their sacrifice.

The next week, so proud was I of this people that I made my stand to be joined to this people of God. But all the churches were closed because the Germans forbade any meeting of more than two people. However, the following week, May 25, the churches were open again. We met, even though our city had been bombed to pieces, the second city in the Second World War after Warsaw. Many of us had lost everything we had. Some had lost their lives. And here the church was together again in sadness, thanking God for our lives but being so sad about the lives of the brothers and sisters, for when one is hurting the whole church is hurting.

We had barely sat down and our organ, the little harmonium, had begun to play when suddenly we heard a sound in the stairway to the basement of the repair shop. It was the sound of boots. The door opened and there stood a German soldier. A hush fell over us all. Forgive us, but when you lose everything through bombing, when everything is being taken away, when your country's being occupied by an enemy, you hate that enemy and we did, we did. There was hatred in our hearts and in our minds.

The first deacon went up to him and said, "Get out, leave us alone! Isn't it enough that you bomb our city and destroy our lives? Isn't it enough that you rob us of everything? This is a little church! Get away, get out, leave us alone!"

The German soldier just stood there and said, "But, I've come here to worship. I'm a brother." I saw the first deacon swallow very hard. Just a few days before, his home and everything he owned had been destroyed. From a wealthy businessman he had been turned into a pauper because of the bombings by the Nazis. Then, suddenly, he throws his arm around the young soldier and says to him, "If you have come here to worship God, you are my brother." And he

took him to the front seat of the church and held his hand through the whole service. Fellowship isn't just for people like ourselves, fellowship extends to the foreigner and the stranger, fellowship extends to the enemy surrounding us. That's the core of the church in mission.

Eight (8): Visitation encourages fellowship. Oosterwal: As a boy I was always afraid that my friends wouldn't accept me. But they did, and one reason was that I had so many people I knew in Rotterdam. As we boys roamed throughout that big city, we would need a drink or to use the toilet. My friends would say, "Hey, Bobby, don't you have an uncle or an aunt around here somewhere?" So I would walk to a door, ring the bell, and inevitably a man or woman would open the door and say, "Aye, Bobby, I'm so glad you are here, come up." Whatever we needed the people behind these doors would provide. It didn't matter that sometimes there were 12 or 15 of us. "That's alright, your friends are my friends."

Who were these people? Not blood relatives, for my mother came from far away Lithuania and my father from the most northern part of Holland. I grew up without uncles and aunts. Who then were these "aunts" and "uncles" all over the city? They were members of the church, that little group of people that met in the bicycle repair shop. And how did I know where they lived? Because my father and mother, like all the members of our church, were visiting others. It is not easy to be a genuine Adventist in life in general; you need the comfort and the strength of each other. When my father was in an accident our family experienced great poverty. Yet almost every day there was a brother or sister of the church who visited us and each time they left a dollar, a gilder, in the hands of my mother. And we didn't have to be afraid of having nothing to eat. We were a fellowship of believers, the very core of what it means to be the church.

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