

# Ministry in the New Testament Church



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37; Matt. 25:38, 40; Acts 9:36; 2 Cor. 8:7–15; Romans 12; James 2:1–9.*

**Memory Text:** “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (*James 1:27, NKJV*).

The verses known as the Great Commission (*Matt. 28:18–20*) are among the best known in the Bible, at least by Christians. The texts often have been described as our mission statement and have been the inspiration for all kinds of mission and evangelistic projects. Indeed, inspired by these texts, Christians have gone all over the world, sometimes at great personal cost, in order to spread the gospel.

And what did Jesus say in the Great Commission? To make disciples, to baptize, and to teach people “to observe all things that I have commanded you” (*Matt. 28:20, NKJV*). And, as we have seen, so much of what Jesus commanded us has to do with taking care of those in need, those hurting, those who are unable to take care of themselves. As such, we need to remember that these instructions to Jesus’ first disciples were not so much a new assignment, something that they hadn’t heard or seen before, but more a continuation of the mission Jesus already had been working among them. This aspect of Jesus’ teaching can be seen clearly in the lives of the new church community as part of fulfilling the Great Commission.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 31.

## A New Kind of Community

After Jesus' ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the group of believers grew rapidly and created the early church, a new kind of community among the followers of Jesus, and initially led by His original disciples. However, this new community was not just something that they made up among themselves; rather, it was built on the teachings and ministry of Jesus and drew on the long history of the Hebrew Scriptures and their prophets.

**Read Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–37. What do you identify as the key elements in these descriptions of the early church community?**

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While it seems the Israelites had failed to ever fully live out the blueprint for a just and generous society, the early church community took seriously the instruction that “ ‘there need be no poor people among you’ ” (*Deut. 15:4, NIV*). One of the practical expressions of their faith was sharing their material resources—even selling land and contributing the funds raised (*see Acts 4:34–5:2*)—to meet the needs of their fellow believers, as well as to be a blessing to those outside the fledgling community, particularly through the ministry of healing (*see Acts 3:1–11, 5:12–16*).

Yet, this community was not a utopian society by any stretch of the imagination. As the number of believers increased, tensions grew about the administration of these resources, particularly in relation to the daily distribution of food to widows (*see Acts 6:1*). The disciples, who were the natural leaders of the group, wanted to focus on preaching the gospel. In order to deal with the situation at hand, they needed to do some reorganizing.

Thus, seven people were appointed to focus on the practical matters of the church community. This was perhaps the first recognition of the different ministries and abilities to be exercised in the church; at the same time, it demonstrated the importance of practical ministry for the church's life and witness. “The same principles of piety and justice that were to guide the rulers among God's people in the time of Moses and of David, were also to be followed by those given the oversight of the newly organized church of God in the gospel dispensation.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 95.

**Try to envision what it must have been like in that early community. How can we reflect those same principles today?**

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## Dorcas's Ministry and Witness

As the church began to spread—as Jesus predicted—“in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (*Acts 1:8, NIV*), new believers took up the faith and ministry of Jesus. Among these was Dorcas—also known as Tabitha—in the city of Joppa. She obviously took seriously Jesus' particular instruction that when clothing the naked, she was doing it for Jesus Himself (*see Matt. 25:38, 40*).

**Read** the description of Dorcas and her ministry in Acts 9:36. How might your life and ministry be described in a similar format to this verse? How would you like to be described?

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It seems that Dorcas's ministry was such that the description of her as a “disciple” (*see Acts 9:36*) and her faithfulness, energy, and focus on others were recognized even beyond her hometown.

Peter was visiting the nearby town of Lydda, and the people of Joppa asked him to come in response to Dorcas's untimely death (*see Acts 9:37–41*). On his arrival in Joppa, Peter was met by many of the people Dorcas had helped through her work for the poor. They showed him the clothes that she had made and undoubtedly told him many stories of how she had helped them and others.

That Peter then prayed for Dorcas and God returned her to life is, of course, no guarantee that life will always work out well for those who devote their lives to serving others. After all, Dorcas had already suffered illness and death; and Stephen, one of those first deacons appointed to minister to the widows in the church, also had become the first martyr (*see Acts 7:54–60*). A life of service is not a smooth path; at times it could even be the rougher road.

However, in this story God used the recognition of His love and power in both Dorcas's life and death to make a strong impact on the people of Joppa: “This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord” (*Acts 9:42, NIV*).

**If you were to pass away, would your contribution be mourned and missed like the ministry of Dorcas was remembered and mourned? How can we leave a better legacy of service? What practical skills do you have—such as Dorcas's skills of making garments—that you might use in service to others?**

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## Giving as a Way of Sharing

After his conversion, the apostle Paul took up the mission to bring the gospel to the Gentile world. The success God gave him raised significant questions about the relationship between the Jewish roots of the emerging Christian faith and the new Gentile followers of Jesus. A council of Jewish and Gentile Christian leaders met in Jerusalem to discuss the matter and seek God's guidance in relation to these complicated questions. The meeting and its outcomes are recorded in Acts 15.

However, in Paul's report of this meeting found in Galatians 2, he adds another important element to the instructions he received from the Jerusalem Council for his continuing ministry among the Gentiles: "All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along" (*Gal. 2:10, NIV*).

And Paul continued to pursue this focus personally (*see, for example, Acts 20:35*) and throughout his ministry. Like the early church in Jerusalem, Paul expanded the vision of the Christian community to embrace all fellow believers.

**Read 2 Corinthians 8:7–15. How does Paul link the gospel and giving generously?**

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Paul also drew on two Old Testament references to urge the believers to generosity and care for their fellow believers in difficult circumstances. He cited the story of God's generous provision of manna to the Israelites in the wilderness as a model of giving and sharing among the wider church community (*see 2 Cor. 8:15*). He also quoted from Psalm 112:9—"They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever" (*2 Cor. 9:9, NIV*).

Paul urged his readers to be intentional about giving, to put aside regularly a portion of their income so that it would be easy to give when he or Titus visited their church to collect their offerings and deliver them to the Christians in need in Jerusalem. He used the example of one church to encourage other churches to similar generosity. "Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves," Paul wrote, "others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else" (*2 Cor. 9:13, NIV*).

**How should we prioritize giving when we are unable to give to every cause or need presented to us?**

## Paul's Guide to Living and Loving Well

Paul's letter to the Romans is best known for its in-depth explanations of the great doctrine of salvation by faith through the death of Christ. But after 11 chapters of such teaching, there is a change of emphasis. Paul offers a practical guide to living and loving well, based on the grace and love of God as revealed in Jesus and the gospel story: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship" (*Rom. 12:1, NIV*). In effect, Paul is saying that because of what God has done for us in Jesus, this is how we should live.

**Read** and summarize Romans 12, particularly noticing the instructions to love and care for others, especially those in need.

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In a sense, Romans 12 acts as a summary of many of the topics Paul gives more detailed attention to in some of his other letters. He talks about the different roles and gifts within the church body, including serving and encouraging others, and giving generously (*see Rom. 12:3–8*). But not only should these things be done, they should be done well, with enthusiasm and—above all—with love (*see Rom. 12:9–11*).

Paul describes in practical terms what this kind of life is about. He urges the believers to be patient in difficulties and persecution, to care for the needy, to be peacemakers wherever and whenever possible and—as we have seen previously—to respond to evil and injustice with kindness, overcoming evil by doing good (*see Rom. 12:20, 21*).

This chapter outlines what it means to live as a new person, serving God individually and as part of a community of faith. Paul told these new followers of Jesus that their lives, priorities, and actions should be changed because of their response to what Jesus had done for them by His death on the cross and the hope of eternal life. Living as they were in an oppressive and often cruel society in the heart of the Roman Empire, Paul instructs them to live differently: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (*Rom. 12:2, NIV*).

**What are some attitudes and practices you need to resist in your community to help you live and love well as a follower of Jesus today?**

## James “the Just”

Christian tradition suggests that James, the brother or stepbrother of Jesus, became a leader of the early church in Jerusalem and was the James who acted as chairman for the Jerusalem Council (*see Acts 15, as well as Galatians 1 and 2*). If so, it is likely that he was the author of the letter preserved in the Bible as the book of James.

James was a common name at the time, but if these were the same person, he also may have been the church leader known as James “the Just,” which suggests a wise leader who properly prioritized his treatment of others and cared for those often forgotten or downtrodden. The book that bears his name has been described as “the New Testament’s book of Proverbs,” focused on practical godliness and living wisely as followers of God.

The author of James was anxious to remind his Christian readers to “not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (*James 1:22, NIV*), and that the religion that matters—that is pure and lasting in God’s sight—is focused on caring for the needy and the oppressed and resisting the corrupting influences of the society around them (*see James 1:27*).

**Read James 2:1–9 and 5:1–5. How is James’s attitude toward those who are rich different from that commonly held in most societies? What are his particular instructions regarding how rich and poor are to be treated within the church community?**

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James argues that wishing someone well—even wishing them God’s blessing—will be of little comfort if they are suffering from cold and hunger. The provision of real food and clothing will be far more useful in expressing and demonstrating our concern for them than all the noble sentiments and good wishes (*see James 2:14–16*). James uses this as an example of the interaction between faith and works in the context of our relationship with God. He also repeats (*James 2:8*) what Jesus taught about loving your neighbor as yourself, showing how this commandment is to be obeyed in daily life. It is lived out in service to God and to others, not to earn salvation but because it is the manifestation of true faith.

**Why is it so easy, even subconsciously, to prefer the rich over the poor?**

**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “Dorcas—Her Ministry and Its Influence,” pp. 66, 67, in *Welfare Ministry*; “A Liberal Church,” pp. 335–345, in *The Acts of the Apostles*; “This Is Pure Religion,” pp. 35–41, in *Welfare Ministry*.

“The Saviour has given His precious life in order to establish a church capable of caring for sorrowful, tempted souls. A company of believers may be poor, uneducated, and unknown; yet in Christ they may do a work in the home, the neighborhood, the church, and even in ‘the regions beyond,’ whose results shall be as far-reaching as eternity.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 640.

“Unselfish liberality threw the early church into a transport of joy; for the believers knew that their efforts were helping to send the gospel message to those in darkness. 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.

### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ How can your church community become more like the one described in the first few chapters of the book of Acts? What might be some practical steps your church leadership could take to encourage the church in this direction?
- ❷ The Seventh-day Adventist Church worldwide uses some of the principles discussed in this week’s study to dictate how tithes and offerings are shared between different parts of the world. What are the benefits of this kind of system of worldwide resource sharing?
- ❸ Are instructions for living, such as those summarized in Romans 12, for example, realistic, practical ways to live? Do they work in the “real world”? Or do they feel more like idealized pictures for stained-glass window “saints”?
- ❹ James 5:1–5 uses strong language that echoes the kind of harsh warnings given by the Old Testament prophets. Why is such strong expression appropriate and necessary?

**Summary:** Spurred by Jesus’ commission and the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples and the early believers set out to share the message and mission of Jesus as widely as possible. Drawing from the teachings of Jesus and the Hebrew Scriptures, the members of the early church formed a new kind of community, sharing what they had with those in need, both within and beyond their community. By their example and their teaching recorded in their letters to these churches, the first Christian leaders urged the believers to lives of faithfulness and service, particularly to those in need.

## Finnish Father's Forgiveness

By SAKARI VEHKAVUORI

Finland was mired in a bloody civil war in 1918. The Reds, mainly comprised of the working class, were locked in conflict with the Whites, mostly from the middle and upper classes.

My great-grandfather Viktor Ståhlberg pleaded with his son, my great-uncle Väinö Ståhlberg, not to join the White troops. Viktor, who had joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church three years earlier, quoted the words of Jesus in Matthew 26:52, “For all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (*NKJV*).

“Please, my son, do not take off with your friends to join the army,” he said.

But Väinö felt a strong urge to fight for what he believed, and he left home under the darkness of night. He met friends on the ice-covered Gulf of Finland early one Sunday morning.

Almost immediately, Red soldiers seized Väinö and the others. It later emerged that a housemaid who had fallen in love with Väinö had revealed his plans to a Red sympathizer, who, in turn, had tipped off the Red army.

That night, the young men were put on a horse-drawn sleigh, and two armed Red soldiers drove them back onto the frozen Gulf of Finland. The soldiers cut a hole in the ice and ordered the prisoners to stand in a row. Väinö refused and was shot dead on the spot. Then three more young men were killed. Two tried to escape and were shot dead.

After that, a second group of prisoners fled. As the two soldiers chased them, one of the prisoners, who had pretended to be dead near the ice hole, fled to freedom. He told others what had happened.

Back in the gulf, the Reds threw the bodies of the dead into the ice hole.

Väinö's father, Viktor, and the rest of the family mourned for days.

After some time, the Whites gained the upper hand as the 1918–1920 civil war wound down. They captured 10 Red prisoners and decided to execute them in revenge for the death of Väinö and his friends.

Viktor grabbed his Bible and hurried to the hilltop execution site.

“Now this slaughtering is enough,” he declared. “You cannot kill any Reds for my son's lost life, not one.”

As he preached on the hill, the cycle of revenge was broken, and the lives of the Red prisoners were spared. Among those 10 Reds were the two sons of a local blacksmith. Seeing his sons saved, the joyful blacksmith started to read the Bible and joined the Adventist Church.



*God also has blessed the family of Viktor, pictured left. Eight family members have served as Adventist pastors, including me and Väinö's brother Toivo Seljavaara, a public evangelist who baptized more than 1,500 people.*