

General Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee Devotional
***Our Testimony* - by Tara J. VinCross**
June 3, 2014

Good Morning!

I am grateful to be here with you and grateful to be a part of this journey of study that we have been on together.

At the very beginning of our time together last year, Dr. Ratsara and Dr. Davidson presented a paper from Acts 15. Out of that grew a mandate and directive to include the hearing of testimonies at the appropriate time as a part of our study process. This was reaffirmed in several comments made during our session together last January. We have had three sessions together that have focused on the Word of God and we delved into study together. Scripture is always our standard for faith and practice. With that time in the Bible as our foundation, we also want to witness how the Holy Spirit has been at work in the Church, affirming His call upon women's lives.

Before we take time to hear testimony, let's take time to open the Word of God together this morning.

As we open this Word, would you bow your heads with me in prayer?

(Prayer)

Acts 15:1-19

Notice first, that the controversy was not swept under the carpet but was dealt with fearlessly. The early church was not afraid of disagreement, and was not afraid to engage their differences. I commend our church for moving forward to engage us in dialogue, even though there are different perspectives. We are okay with difference and we are engaging this together.

Peter is the first to speak, just as Peter was the first on the day of Pentecost. In **verse 7** Peter flashes back to his time with Cornelius, in which God confirmed his favor on the Gentiles. Imagine how unexpected and disorienting it was for Peter when

the Holy Spirit fell “while Peter was still speaking” (Acts 10:44), signifying God’s acceptance.

v. 8 “God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.”

The question that Peter had to wrestle with in that moment was: Have they been given the same Holy Spirit? Has God proven His acceptance of them by His response?

v. 9 - 11 They were saved by faith. Indeed we are all saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is significant - this is what unites us. Beyond any of our convictions or beliefs about this or any other issue, **we are saved and a part of one family through Christ.**

v. 12 Next, Paul and Barnabas give testimony and tell of “the miraculous signs and wonders among the Gentiles through them.”

These signs and wonders serve as an authenticating function. It is clear to me from the text that in addition to the foundation of the word of God, the believers paid close attention to where the Holy Spirit was at work among them.

Then James, the leader of the early church speaks:

v. 14 He states that God has chosen a people for his name from the Gentiles! Pause and realize how revolutionary this is.

Deuteronomy 14:2 says, for example, “You are a people [lxx laos] holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples [lxx ethne, nations] on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession.”

The Israelites were chosen, called out from among the nations to be God’s people. James says the opposite: from within the nations God has taken a people for himself.

As Tannehill says, “The speakers are making the important affirmation that Gentiles can be God’s laos in the full sense that Israel is.”¹

James quotes **Amos 9:11-12** and sees it as a fulfillment of God’s mission to the Gentiles.

v. 16-18 The believers and leaders understood scripture in a new way because of what the Holy Spirit was doing in the church.

From this brief look at Acts 15 we can see that:

Peter appealed to the direct guidance from God in his encounter with Cornelius.

Barnabas and Paul appealed to God’s confirmation through signs and wonders.

James appeals to Scripture. A new understanding of the scriptures.

They valued the Biblical evidence, and they evaluated the evidence of the Holy Spirit, at work among them.

v. 19 says, we should not make it difficult for them. This was a courageous statement from James.

Is what is happening from God? they asked. If so, the path is clear. The Gentile believers are to be accepted and allowed to be a part of the body without circumcision.

God spoke to the early church through experiences (like Peter with Cornelius and Paul and Barnabas) and God spoke through the Scriptures.

The leaders were full of love and respect for one another and they were seeking peace together. Paul and Peter did not always agree, even over something similar to this very issue, according to Galatians 2. Yet here they are speaking together with one purpose in mind.

¹ NIV Application Commentary: Acts

This time as we meet together we are no longer debating, we are finding a way forward. What a beautiful context to hear testimonies of how God is at work in His Church. This morning as we look into the Word of God, I have also been asked to share testimonies from our colleagues working in the gospel ministry around the world. Today, we will hear the stories of the Holy Spirit's work in the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist church.

We will now hear stories of how God is active. These stories are not polished because these are different videos testimonies, filmed by different people around the world. No budget was allocated to this, so they are all different, however the goal is to uplift and glorify God and it happens in these stories. I'm sorry to say we did not have time for each division to be represented, though we wish we did. I want to thank each of the divisions for their response in gathering these stories. It could not have happened without you.

We will take about 30 minutes to hear the recounting of God's work around the world. I pray that we will all be able to see the evidence of God's Spirit through these miraculous signs and wonders.

Testimonies

Danijela - South Pacific Division

Sandra - Seventh-day Adventist Church in Canada, North American Division

Costas - Malawi - Southern-Africa and Indian Ocean

Michelle - Bermuda Conference of SDAs - North American Division

Chantel - Seventh-day Adventist Church in Canada, North American Division

Mary & Noreen - Trans-European Division

Hao Ya Jie - China - Northern Asia Pacific Division

Juanita - Florida Conference of SDAs - North American Division

Amen! Simple words recounting the glory of God and how He has worked.

Revelation 12:11 is a familiar, yet powerful verse defining the way believers at the end of earth's history are able to persevere and overcome in the face of our accuser and enemy.

“They triumphed over him, by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”

In the courts, a testimony is a formal spoken or written statement given as evidence or proof that something happened. In the church, the phrase is typically used for a time when we publicly recount our conversion experience, or praise God for how he worked in our lives.

According to Revelation 12:11, by the blood of the Lamb and by this testimony we are able to triumph over the accuser who is in our midst. By (1) Jesus’ saving blood - His grace which saves us while we were still sinners and unites us as one family, and (2) by our continuous, public recounting of the story of how He is at work in our lives and in the Church, we live as overcomers. This testimony is so powerful!

Each of you have a testimony. You have told a testimony, and each day you live your testimony.

Let me share with you a little of mine.

I stand as one of thousands of Seventh-day Adventists around the world who did not grow up in this church but who studied the Scriptures and found our hearts burning within us with passion and a realization that God had opened up the truth before our eyes.

I have marveled at the way God worked in my life to bring me to where I am today. I am committed to God, committed to fulfilling as faithfully as possible His call on my life, committed to the Church, and committed to serving people and proclaiming this message. It’s amazing how God has brought me to this place.

My mom had been influenced by members of the Seventh-day Adventist church and had joined, but left while I was still a baby. I had a varied elementary education in all types of public and private schools, but when it came time for high school, my mom encouraged me and sacrificially worked for me to be able to attend Academy in Washington state where I grew up.

There at Auburn Adventist Academy, I began to grow in my relationship with God and understanding of the Scriptures. I saw a flyer advertising a program called Youth Challenge, a literature evangelism group which some of my friends were a part of. On my application I shared that I was not yet Adventist but I was open. Pastor Cindy Tutsch decided to open the door for my participation, even though I had not yet decided what I believed.

The first day of Youth Challenge I was handed a thick Revelation Seminar binder and Bible from Amazing Facts and I was told that tonight, you and a partner will be teaching a table full of people about the first lesson. I poured over that lesson, reading each verse for myself, for the first time. Each week - 3 nights per week - this pattern continued. Studying the lesson for 2-3 hours in preparation, canvassing door-to-door each day, and team teaching the Revelation Seminar to our guests on Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday evenings. I also started Bible studies with Pastor Cindy.

I felt delighted to spend time with God in His Word. He was right there with me, the unseen Holy Spirit my constant companion guiding my study. The truth I was learning and understanding allowed me to grasp a more beautiful picture of this God I was falling in love with. Imagine, a God who sets aside a Sabbath for us to rest each week? What an amazing God who doesn't destroy people in an ever-burning hell (as my friend's churches had spoken of) but instead who brings about justice in love and with finality. I was seeing a God full of compassion, as I realized that those who die rest in the grave, so that those who fall asleep and those alive are able to experience the restoration and redemption of God together at the same time when he returns. I saw a God of judgment who will not let wickedness continue unchecked, but who waits until all have had a chance to choose him, and who stands in the place of all those who accept his sacrificial gift. This God who even now intercedes in love for each of us, his beloved children whom he died for.

At the end of the summer, I made an appeal to the people at our table and they decided to get baptized and so did I. We were baptized on the same Sabbath, 19 years ago this August.

I was the first to hug them as they came up out of the water, and they hugged me after I was raised from the water too. It was a powerful embrace. To know that God had used

me in their lives, even as he was leading me to follow him myself. I surrendered everything that day. Jesus became Lord of my life and I promised that I would do anything that He asked. I was his disciple now and I would follow Him no matter the cost.

I continued to be involved in the program each summer, and lead out in spiritual programs at my academy during the school year. It wasn't until I graduated from high school, and was in the midst of serving with Youth Challenge as a group leader that I sensed God calling me to pastoral ministry. I had previously had my eyes set on another career path, which I remained focused on all through academy, but now, all I could see was Jesus calling me to follow Him into service as a pastor. At very key moments, this calling was affirmed during my time in the Scriptures (which are so precious to me), by other people around me, and by dear mentors. As I was praying for confirmation, I remember that I had just finished sharing a message upfront, and I remember a couple people affirming that they saw God's calling on my life. I sensed God speaking to me and I knew that I wanted nothing else than to follow Him.

I enrolled at Southwestern Adventist University as a Theology major immediately, and started that fall. I loved my time at SWAU and found my professors to be incredibly affirming of my calling and helping me to have an even deeper understanding of my calling to ministry from the Word of God. Not counting time as a taskforce pastor or student pastoring, I have now served for 12 years in full time pastoral ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This church that God led me to, and that I love so much.

It has been an amazing, rich, and rewarding journey. As I know each of you have experienced, there have been times of incredible joy and there have been times walking with people through inexpressible pain. Yet, I have seen God to be in the very midst of all of it. The Holy Spirit present and real at each point.

We have moved forward by faith as God told us to risk, in planting a church and in starting a Youth Challenge program in Philadelphia, seeing God work in this 5th largest city in the United States, where there is one Adventist to every 600 people in our city, a ratio greater than many areas we would term "mission fields." We have seen so many who were not believers in God at all, accept Jesus as their Lord and join this church.

My greatest joys are standing in the baptismal waters as someone surrenders to Jesus, and seeing members empowered in ministry, especially young adults. As they grasp that God wants to use their gifts for His Kingdom's purposes it thrills my heart.

I am Adventist not by birth, but by conviction regarding the way this church reveals the character, law, love, and purpose of God in the world. In our people, our policy, and our doctrine we desire to represent our crucified, risen, and soon coming Savior before the world. We have been led to the truth in the past, as God unfolded each step, and we will be led now. The danger in our personal life, and our collective life as a body is to try to control instead of trust. We can trust the Everlasting God, Sovereign over all, our Creator and Re-creator.

The appeal today from Acts 15 and Revelation 12:11 is to open our eyes and witness the guidance of God through the Holy Spirit's work around us. To remember to treat one another with charity, as we move forward trusting God.

One of my favorite quotes from Ellen White:

"True love is not merely a sentiment or an emotion. It is a living principle, a principle that is manifest in action. True love, wherever it exists, will control the life. Thus it is with the love of God." - Australian Union Conference Record, June 1, 1900.

- * I pray that the conclusion we reach will seem good to the Holy Spirit and to us.
- * That we may be empowered to move forward in the mission God has called us to.
- * That we would be moved to true love for each other and to the world.
- * That we can bear the image of God in our community, and draw many to Christ.