

FAMILIES OF FAITH

Theme: Maintaining a faithful family in an environment where cultural ideas are often at variance with your faith.

Let us take a look at the meaning of these two words, "Family" and "Faith"

Family: In the context of human society, a family is a group of people related either by consanguinity (by recognized birth), affinity (by marriage or other relationship), or co-residence or some combination of these. Members of the immediate family may include spouses, parents, brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters. Members of the extended family may include grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, nieces, and siblings-in-law. Sometimes these are also considered members of the immediate family, depending on an individual's specific relationship with them. In most societies, the family is the principal institution for the socialization of children.

Faith. According to Hebrews 11:1 Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Simply put, faith is; believing in what you cannot see. We are all acquainted with the terminology, "doubting Thomas." Thomas; one of Jesus' disciples was not with them when Jesus appeared to them after his resurrection. Thomas did not believe and needed proof. We have seen the Lord, but he said unto them, except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe. (John: 20)

Eight days later Jesus reappeared and Thomas believed. Jesus said unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed (John 20:29). Faith is not faith if it can be seen.

The Memory text says He (Jesus) was made perfect and became the author and finisher of our faith.

How is He the author of our faith?

Our salvation is founded on non-other than Jesus Christ who gave Himself a ransom for us. God made man to love and serve Him and to live forever. But Adam's disobedience brought sin and a terminal condition that needed someone to rescue him and restore trust. Christ came in the likeness of sinful flesh and paid the price. Thus He became the author of eternal salvation.

What makes Him the finisher of our faith?

He is the finisher of our faith through His perfect life. This perfection is founded on a character developed in the school of hard knocks, and buttressed by obedience learned through suffering (Heb.5:8). But this faith is also lived in a culture where Christians and non-Christians occupy and share the same environment. Consequently, the entire family is impacted to a lesser or greater extent by the culture in which it lives. But cultures are not static and history is replete with the deeds from many past cultures. For example, Sunday worship reminds us, not only of a past culture, but also how far-reaching the power of culture can be.

So, What is Culture?

Culture is one of those words that is replete with meanings. The following statement will be adequate for our discussion:

Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. No matter what a people's culture is, one thing is for certain, it will change. "Culture appears to have become key in our interconnected world with its many ethnically diverse societies, riddled by conflicts associated with religion, ethnicity, ethical beliefs, and, essentially, the elements which make up culture. While change is inevitable, the past should also be respected and preserved. Christianity itself is a culture. It is one in which the ethos of the gospel of Jesus Christ becomes known. In doing so it must interact with other cultures in a way which allows them to learn and understand their rights and norms as well as such things as family dynamics.

In Acts chapter 10 we see how God intervened to show the Jews that Christ's death was for all cultures. Thus in verses 34-35 Peter learns His lesson that God accepts all peoples and could proclaim, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him (Acts 10:34,35). Paul says, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. God has only one culture, LOVE!

How were the cultural differences in the early church resolved?

The first half of Acts has focused on the Jewish Christian community, particularly on the influential Jerusalem church. The Christian witness had begun there and although a precedent had been set, to reach the Gentile world, there was still a cultural divide to negotiate. There were some Jewish Christians who had serious reservations about the way the outreach to Gentiles had been conducted and it became necessary for the protagonists to find a way to resolve the impasse. Having established from Scripture the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God, James drew his conclusion to the question of requirements for Gentile membership (v. 19). Gentiles should not be given undue difficulties; no unnecessary obstacles should be placed in their way. But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood (Acts 15:19,20) Culture can be friend or foe as it engages the Christian faith.

The gospel has always encountered opposition, both from outside and inside the 'church.' Christianity is made up of differing cultures all professing Christ. The early church had to contend with false teachers. This led the apostle Paul to admonish the new converts to Christianity, to Hold fast to that which is good (1 Thes. 5: 21) That admonition still holds good for us today who have to encounter a multiplicity of so-called Christian cultures. Paul counsels Timothy, Study to show yourself approved. To counteract the plethora of doctrines bombarding the intellect, it is imperative that we observe the admonition of Paul. Church history sadly, shows that compromise and accommodation to cultures has yielded a patchwork of pseudo-Christian beliefs posing as authentic Christianity, but John 16:13 tells us that Jesus has redeemed this world, and His Spirit guides His followers into all truth. The Bible has a number of texts which shows that God is no respecter of culture, but accepts a person on the basis of their faith. The lesson mentions a number of people who encountered tests of faith.

What lessons can we learn from their experiences?

Abraham: Who was he? Why did God call him? For I have chosen him, for I know that he will command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him. (Genesis 18:19-20). A wife offering another woman to bear children on her behalf, as in the case of Sarah and Hagar, was culturally accepted in the ancient Near East. The results of this venture teaches us that when attempting to cooperate with God's plans, using practices because they are culturally accepted may do more harm than good.

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah: Who were they? Young men from Israel who were taken captive to Babylon. They moved from one culture to another but did not lose their connection with their God. In fact, their close relationship with God not only saved the life of many, but also catapulted them into positions of power (Daniel 1).

Esther: Esther 2:7 - 9. Tells the story of a young woman who was forced to leave home, and later to ignore her own culture. She was catapulted to the highest level in her new country and was eventually instrumental in saving her people. While God does not place us in difficult or unholy alliances He is able to use those situations to His glory.

In many churches there is a continual wearing away of the pure gospel, a contaminating process causing many to compromise their faith. This was evidenced in the life of Jacob when God instructed him to go to Bethel. He had married women from a different culture who brought their own customs with them. Hence the worship of Jehovah was being undermined and so God instructed Jacob to get rid of their idols and anything which prohibited true worship. In 1 Kings 11, we have a similar situation where Solomon married many foreign wives who led him astray.

What are some things creeping into our church affecting our worship and our witness?

How about "dress"? "music"? "behaviour"?

We are all impacted by the culture in which we live. Our responsibility as Christians is to exist within that culture, keeping in harmony with our faith and shunning, as much as possible, anything which conflicts with it. Always ensuring that our faith is not being compromised.

It has been concluded that for one reason or another change is inevitable and can be disruptive. The problem for Christians is how to sustain their faith during these times of change. Like Abraham who was called to leave his people and his culture to go to a different people and a different culture, many Jamaicans were invited to go to England just after the war. They too left their people and their culture to go to a different people and a different culture. While the majority stayed, there were those who found it difficult to adjust and returned home. Some died and others adjusted while not fully adopting. Part of the problem was; how to sustain your secondary and humble culture in the face of the assertive and prevailing culture?

The story of the Hebrew young men (Daniel 1), Daniel, Hananiah, Michael, and Azariah shows that change brings with it experiences of different kinds, it may be losing your culture, the anxiety of uncertainty of the future. A family's ability to adjust to changes will determine whether these experiences will propel them to new levels of growth in their spirituality/faith or lead to anxiety and stress. In the end, a person's values should be shaped by the Word of God

and not by culture. Although we are Christians we are not immune to the dominant culture. Studies have shown that fewer and fewer people are attending church. Although many claim to be Christians, only a small percentage of those professing Christianity do attend church on any given weekend. This trend was evidenced in Israel where the generations after the death of Joshua there was a crisis of faith. The people lost sight of their forefather's values and turned to idols (Judges 2:7-13). Then as now, the cultural values and beliefs which are transmitted to the next generation were and are not internalised by subsequent generations. Values that are celebrated, championed and reinforced shape the culture of a ministry or organization, and leaders set the tone and pace for how those values are emphasized.

This holds true for belief systems such as the church. The problem here is that true faith is not the result of genetics; it cannot be passed on naturally from generation to generation. Every person must have his/her own faith and must know God for himself/herself. They are those who are born of God. The apostle John says, as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12-13). The church as a whole, and parents in particular need to do all they can to create the environment that will enable young people to want to make the right choices. Ellen White says, the work of the mother at home with the children is the most important work (Adventist Home). This is in stark contrast to feminine philosophies which asserts that it is impossible for a woman to be fulfilled while staying home and raising children (Dobson in *Man to Man about Women*, p.150). The good news is, Jesus is alive. The scriptures give a unity of the good news of Jesus. Beginning in Matthew we have the story of the resurrection and the angels who proclaimed He is not here He is risen, and the apostle Paul writing to the Romans proclaimed, I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "but the righteous man shall live by faith." (Romans 1:16-17).

Now, as in Christ's day, the work of God's kingdom lies not with those who are clamoring for recognition and support by earthly rulers and human laws, but with those who are declaring, to the people, in His name those spiritual truths that will work in the receivers the experience of Paul: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." Galatians 2:20. Then they will labor as did Paul for the benefit of men. He said, "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." 2 Corinthians 5:20.—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 510.