

Aim of lesson

For the young people to appreciate why it is important that as a community Christadelphians should retain a separate identity, and to appreciate from scripture what should be our attitude to other denominations.

Bible background

Exodus 19:6; 2 Corinthians 6:14-17; Acts 19:8-10; Galatians 1:6-9

Preparation required

Look for some topical news items about inter-church co-operation and about matters likely to perpetuate division. You could visit a church or a religious bookshop and pick some information about ecumenical activities.

Go through the students' notes and familiarise yourself with the points which should emerge from each section.

Suggested outline of lesson

Separateness is not a popular idea. Our culture is one which emphasizes that people are the same as each other, and tries to minimize differences. To some extent this is not a bad thing - many differences are prolonged without any good reason. So we need to distinguish between being separate because it is important and being separate to avoid the trouble of having to think.

The principle of separation

Spend a moment or two explaining that the Hebrew and Greek words that are translated by the English 'holy', 'sanctify' and 'saint', actually have as their basic meaning 'separated'. That which is destined for the service of God is 'separated out' or 'holy'. The 'saints' are those human beings who separate themselves in the service of Christ. Look at some examples, like Exodus 19:6.

Talk to the young people about the way in which Israel were made a separate people, dedicated to God. Their separation was physical, and God's people had a separate identity from the rest of mankind. So Abram physically left Ur; the Jews were brought out of Egypt, and were instructed to clear the land of Canaan of the nations that inhabited it.

At the same time God made provision for those strangers who chose to ally themselves to Israel (Numbers 9:14) because Israel had themselves been strangers

(Exodus 22:21). This is an important point: Israel was to be separate, but at the same time a route by which Gentiles could come to God.

Now get the young people to look at John 17, and to see the difference in our situation, in that we are not told to separate ourselves physically from the people around us. Follow through the argument in John 17. Jesus prays for his disciples, 'not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them (v15) ... and sanctify (separate, v17) them by the truth.' He prays, secondly, for 'those who believe in me through their message.' (v20). Jesus prays for 'complete unity among believers,' (v23) in order 'to let the world know that you sent me.' (v23).

Now bring out the same points from these New Testament passages, remembering the meaning of 'holy'. Look at some or all of 2 Corinthians 6:14-17, Hebrews 10:10, and 1 Peter 2:5.

Separation from other denominations

Move on now to the relationship between the Christadelphian community and other denominations. Ask the young people if they have come across any news items about inter-church co-operation or any movement towards re-integration. What are the burning issues which still divide? Should one play down these issues in the spirit of unity?

Ask whether it is a good thing that there are so many different denominations in Christendom?

Scriptural considerations

- The apostle Paul was very concerned that there should be no division in the church. 1 Corinthians 1:10-14; 12:20-25
- In this context you may like to discuss 1 Corinthians 11:18, where Paul says that one benefit of divisions is that they highlight issues and enable the truth to be distinguished.
- Disciples were warned to keep away from people who caused divisions (Romans 16:17).
- Any house which is divided against itself will fall (Luke 11:17)

Practical considerations

- People look at the chaos that exists, with so many different groups saying different things and competing with each other, and conclude that they are all wrong.
- One of the results of the divisions is that there is no clear message communicated about what the Bible teaches.

- If someone wants to turn to God they are faced with a bewildering choice of where to go.

So why are there divisions?

Assuming that you have concluded that the ideal would be a single united church, with everyone believing the true gospel, move on to discuss the reasons behind the divisions between denominations.

It seems clear that in the first century believers began by worshipping in the temple and the synagogue (Acts 2:46; 17:1-2), even though the Jews did not believe in the Lord Jesus. However, as time went on they began to meet separately. Acts 19:8-10 describes how this happened at Ephesus, and gives the reason for the separation - the disbelief of the Jews and their opposition to the truth.

Ask the young people if this is still the situation today?

Wrong teaching

The apostles realised that the gospel would become corrupted by people who, deliberately or accidentally, taught wrong things. Look with the young people at Acts 20:29-30, 2 Timothy 4:3-4, 2 Peter 2:1-2.

This is what happened. Over the centuries, the pagan world affected the thinking of Christians, and bit by bit wrong teachings were incorporated.

History

It is a sad fact of human nature that people are slow to heal divisions and resolve disagreements. It shows itself in the way we behave toward each other as individuals, but groups of people behave in the same way - Northern Ireland is an example. Once people have formed themselves into a 'club', they want to strengthen their identity, rather than diminishing it - look at the example of football supporters.

In the same way, religious groups are reluctant to recognise when they are wrong, and denominations turn in on themselves and exaggerate the differences between themselves and others in order to reinforce their identity.

So what should be our attitude to other denominations?

Mark 9:38-40; Luke 11:23. These apparently conflicting passages should teach us a lot. In the first case the man casting out demons was not opposing Jesus: he merely did not belong in the group of disciples; in the second, Jesus is teaching anyone who does not walk with him is opposing him. Our view of others should not simply be decided by whether or not they are in the same group as ourselves; it should be based on whether or not they are working for the same aims as the Lord Jesus. The attitude of the apostle Paul is a good illustration of this. Look at Philippians 1:14-18.

This does not mean that we should water down our beliefs in order to be able to cooperate with other denominations. Look at Galatians 1:6-9; 2:11-14. Paul is extremely outspoken in the way he speaks of those who taught 'another gospel', and in the way he stood up to the apostle Peter.

What are the positive reasons for remaining separate?

In order to maintain our faith

We have a distinctive and special understanding of scripture, which we can maintain only by meeting separately from other communities.

In order to preach the truth

Similarly, and just as important, is the fact that we are able, in the days before the Lord Jesus returns, to teach some important truths which are not generally believed in Christendom. Examples are:

- The unique position of the nation of Israel as God's witnesses.
- The prophecies of the return of the Lord Jesus at a time of great trouble in the world, when the future of the nation of Israel is under threat.
- Maintaining our faith in biblical morality, rather than compromising it in order to avoid trouble.

Relevance to our lives

There is a growing tendency among the churches to minimise doctrinal differences in the name of unity. However attractive, the unity is only superficial. We must be on our guard to 'test the spirits, to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.' (1 John 4:1)

Prayer

Dear Lord God, you have caused the wonder of your truth to be revealed in your word, and we thank you for it. Help us to treasure the special message that we see revealed there, and to teach it with understanding and gentleness to those who do not yet understand it. Give us strength, we pray, to shine as lights in a dark world, not following the evil that we see so often around us, nor feeling ashamed of being different. Amen.

Other suggestions for activities

You may like to discuss how we should respond if, for example, we are invited to a wedding in a Church of England or Roman Catholic church. What should we do about hymns or prayers with which we do not agree?

Discuss whether we should ever attend services in the churches of other denominations? If so, what should be our attitude?

POSTSCRIPT

If you will next week be dealing with 'Thy Kingdom Come - Israel & Arabs Today', look at the 'Preparation Required' and think about whether you want to ask the young people to find, during the week, the Web sites it mentions.