

Unity: The Bond of Revival



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *John 17:9–11, 20–24; 1 Cor. 12:12–18; Acts 4:32, 33; 1:8; 15:1–31; Matt. 18:16–20.*

Memory Text: “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to have a walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (*Ephesians 4:1–3, NKJV*).

Unity is an essential ingredient of revival. Conflict, division, and strife do not create an environment for nurturing revival. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on a church that had united in Christ's mission to the world. Their petty differences were subordinate to the call of Christ's larger mission. Striving for supremacy ceased in the light of Christ's commission to reach the lost with the gospel. If the early followers of Christ were busy vying for power, the work would have been stymied from the start. Instead, convicted by the Holy Spirit to die to self, they were united in purpose and mission.

In short, where there is no unity, there can be no revival. Where jealousy, envy, and jostling for supremacy reign, the Holy Spirit's power is withheld. How crucial, then, that we learn how to break down the barriers that sometimes separate us so that we can enter into the unity that Christ seeks for His church.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 17.*

Answering Christ’s Prayer for Unity

John 17 contains Jesus’ great intercessory prayer. It reveals what was on His mind at that momentous hour of earth’s history.

Read John 17:9–11, 20–24. What was Jesus’ heartfelt longing? Why was this so important? How did the disciples’ relationship to one another demonstrate genuine Christian faith? See Acts 4:32, 33.

The “oneness,” or unity, of the disciples prepared their hearts for the reception of the fullness of the Holy Spirit’s power. Christ’s prayer for His church was fulfilled. They surrendered their differences. Love prevailed. Strife was banished.

“Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all” (Acts 4:32, 33, NKJV).

This passage links the disciples having “one heart and one soul” with their “great power” in witnessing. In the challenging circumstances of first-century Jerusalem at a time when Christianity was unpopular, these committed Christians shared their resources. They supported one another. They laid aside their personal ambitions. Their unselfish attitudes and generosity of spirit prepared them to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit’s power for witnessing.

“Notice that it was after the disciples had come into perfect unity, when they were no longer striving for the highest place that the Spirit was poured out. They were of one accord. All differences had been put away.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 20.

Why is the fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer in John 17 so important for our church? What does Jesus’ desire for the unity of the first-century church reveal about His desire for our church today?

New Testament Illustrations of Unity

The New Testament world of the first century was divided by caste, social status, and gender. It was a society in social turmoil. The concepts of equal rights, freedom, and human dignity were not the accepted norms.

Then Christianity burst upon the scene. It created a social revolution. Jesus' teachings of equality, justice, concern for the poor, and respect for the marginalized appeared radical. At the same time, New Testament believers united around the core values of Creation and Redemption. They taught that all human beings were created by God and that Redemption was made available to all people through the cross of Christ. The Cross showed that each person, regardless of his or her worldly status, was of immense value in God's sight.

How do the following images illustrate the way in which different believers, regardless of their backgrounds, blend into a harmonious whole? *1 Cor. 12:12–18; 1 Pet. 2:4, 5.*

What images could be more powerful to illustrate unity in the church? The apostle Paul uses the body to illustrate the church and its members. The body is closely knit. Its members are interrelated and mutually dependent upon one another. All parts have their function. If one part of the body suffers, the entire body suffers (*1 Cor. 12:18–26*).

Peter adds the illustration of a spiritual building with the members as stones, each fitting perfectly into the construction of a glorious temple that will glorify Jesus' name. In these illustrations, each member is intimately linked. It was this bond of loving unity in a world of fractured relationships, power struggles, and divisive schisms that was to be a powerful argument for Christianity. Jesus stated this universal truth clearly: "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (*John 13:34, 35, NKJV*).

How well does your local church reflect the unity spoken about here? Ask yourself, too: are you helping to bring unity? What attitudes might you be harboring that could be adding to the problem?

Elements of Unity: Our Mission and Message

The unity experienced by the New Testament believers was based on far more than emotional warmth between members.

Read Acts 1:8, 4:33, 5:42, 9:31, and 28:28–31. What was the all-consuming passion of the New Testament church? How did this passion unite them?

The disciples were consumed with something much larger than themselves. Christ’s commission to take the gospel to the entire world swallowed up their personal ambitions. The church cannot reach the community with the gospel until it is united, but it will never be united until it is consumed with the preaching of the gospel.

Mission is a great unifying factor. The early believers rallied around mission. The life, death, resurrection, priestly ministry, and return of our Lord bound them together. New converts were anchored in the “apostles’ doctrine” (*Acts 2:41, 42, NKJV*). The teachings of Jesus provided the foundation for their unity.

The apostle Peter uses the term “present truth” (*2 Pet. 1:12*). The message of “present truth” in Peter’s day united the church and propelled it forward with a prophetic impetus: Jesus Christ of Nazareth was the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. They were united with an urgent, present-truth message regarding the fulfillment of prophecy.

Now, in the final days of earth’s history, God has given His people an urgent, present-truth message, as well (*Rev. 14:6–12*). It is the message of “the everlasting gospel” in the context of judgment, of obedience, and of the Lord’s return. This is what unites Seventh-day Adventists as a worldwide family. If this message was watered down, given a secondary place, or treated as a relic of the past, the unity of the church would be fractured, and its mission would lose its urgency. If the church’s message is either misunderstood or distorted, its mission will be unclear. It is the proclamation of the prophetic message of the Three Angels that gives Seventh-day Adventists the reason for our existence.

How connected are you with our message and mission? Or look at it this way: why are you a Seventh-day Adventist? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Church Organization: The Structure for Unity

The New Testament reveals that the early church had a definite organizational structure. This structure helped to preserve the doctrinal purity of the church and keep it focused on its mission.

In Acts 6, a small group of disciples met together to solve the problem of the distribution of food to the widows of the Greek converts. They selected deacons to solve the dilemma. Church members respected the authority of these church leaders.

When the apostle Paul was converted on the Damascus Road, he was directed to Ananias, a representative of the church (*Acts 9:10–17*).

After Paul’s baptism by Ananias, the Holy Spirit directed him to meet with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem in order to confirm his ministry (*Acts 9:26–30*).

In Acts 20 Paul met with the church elders from Ephesus to urge them to be on guard against false teachers and their heresies (*Acts 20:17, 27–32*).

How did the New Testament church solve a major dispute over circumcision? *Acts 15:1–31*.

The Jerusalem Council saved the first-century church from a serious schism. Church organization with administrative authority was essential in preserving the doctrinal integrity of the New Testament church. In this instance, local church representatives were sent to Jerusalem to participate in doctrinal discussions, which would have serious implications for the future of the church. Once this representative group came to a consensus, they wrote out their decision in a committee action and circulated it throughout the churches where the problem originated: Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (*Acts 15:23*).

Members accepted the decision of the Jerusalem Council and rejoiced that the Holy Spirit had guided them to an answer to their dilemma (*Acts 15:30–35*).

If you are a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, then you are involved in the church structure. What is your role in that structure, and how might you be more constructively involved?

Achieving Unity

The closer we come to Jesus, the closer we come to one another. We see with new spiritual eyesight. The Spirit of Christ enables us to view one another differently. The little things that once bothered us are reframed by the grace of Christ. Cherished hostilities are relinquished in the light of His magnificent grace. Old scores and disputes are, as much as possible, set aside. Barriers are broken down. The gospel heals broken relationships.

When the Holy Spirit was poured out in its fullness on Pentecost, the attitudes of the disciples toward one another changed dramatically. In the light streaming from the Cross, they saw one another differently.

“Every Christian saw in his brother a revelation of divine love and benevolence. One interest prevailed; one subject of emulation swallowed up all others. The ambition of the believers was to reveal the likeness of Christ’s character and to labor for the enlargement of His kingdom.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 48.

List some of the practices that fostered unity among first-century Christians. Why are these practices so powerful in bringing believers together? *Matt. 18:16–20; Acts 1:14; 12:5, 12; 6:7; Matt. 28:16–20.*

Hoping or wishing for unity does not bring it about. The New Testament church prayed together and talked together. They studied God’s Word together, and together they shared their faith. Prayer, Bible study, and witnessing are powerful elements that create, foster, and sustain the unity of the church. As we pray for one another, we are drawn closer together. Participating in an evangelistic outreach to the community creates a sense of oneness or togetherness. A living, dynamic, unified, and revived church is one whose members are praying together, studying God’s Word, and reaching out to their community.

What are some of the forces at play that threaten the unity of your local church, or even the church as a whole? Why is it important to understand what these forces are and to be ready to deal with them?

Further Study: “In these first disciples was presented marked diversity. They were to be the world’s teachers, and they represented widely varied types of character. In order successfully to carry forward the work to which they had been called, these men, differing in natural characteristics and in habits of life, needed to come into unity of feeling, thought, and action. This unity it was Christ’s object to secure. To this end He sought to bring them into unity with Himself.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 20.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Why is a unified church structure so important for us? What would happen to our mission, to our message, and to our church as a whole if congregations, conferences, unions, or divisions were to go their own way? Imagine the chaos that would ensue.
- ❷ In class, answer the question: Why am I a Seventh-day Adventist?
- ❸ However important unity is for the church, are there some things that are even more important? If so, what? For instance, in dealing with those who preached doctrines with which he disagreed, Paul wrote this: “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, if any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed” (*Gal. 1:8, 9*). What happened to unity here, at least with these people?
- ❹ Dwell more on the issue of how our message and mission are crucial to our whole identity as Seventh-day Adventists. After all, what would our purpose be without our message, which no one else is preaching to the world? At the same time, what other things unite us as Seventh-day Adventists? That is, though we would have nothing were it not for our mission and message, what else do we have that helps to define us, and why are these important, as well?
- ❺ Why is unity so crucial for any revival and reformation among us?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *John 17:9–11, 20–24*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Analyze the elements of unity in the New Testament church and explore the relationship between unity and revival.

Feel: Discern the attitudes that lead to revival and apply them to his or her local congregation today.

Do: Accept Christ's invitation for unity, based on a common message, mission, and church organization.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Understanding the Unity of the New Testament Church

A What is the burden of Christ's heart in John 17, just before His crucifixion? Why is this so important to Jesus?

B How do Peter (*in 1 Peter 2:4, 5*) and Paul (*in 1 Corinthians 12:12–18*) illustrate unity? Why do you think they used these particular figures or illustrations for the unity of the church?

C What role do the mission and the message of the church play in the unity of the church?

II. Feel: Experiencing New Testament Unity

A In what ways does pride lead to rivalry in the church today? Can our own humanness keep us from experiencing the unity that Christ desires for His church? What can we do to achieve the unity that Christ desires in our local church?

III. Do: Applying the Principles of New Testament Unity

A In what ways should we relate when conflict threatens the unity of the church? What is a better option than taking sides in a conflict?

B What are some of the practical steps we can take as a congregation in order to continually foster unity?

► **Summary:** Jesus places priority on the unity of His church. The entire New Testament places prime importance on relationships between church members. A praying congregation with a common message and mission will receive the power of the Holy Spirit to make a major impact on their community for Christ. Like the early disciples unified in His love, we can make a difference in our world.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *John 17:20–24*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Unity is essential for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in revival. When Christ’s church is unified, focused upon His message, and passionate about His mission rather than afflicted with the malaise of complacency, revival will come.

Just for Teachers: Highlight the importance of Christ’s emphasis on unity in light of His intercessory prayer in John 17. Discuss the devastating effects of disunity upon a local congregation or school. The story below will help to set the tone for your class.

Jim and Tom were both in their late twenties. They were teachers at a small Christian school. Early in the school year they had a disagreement that placed a heavy strain on their relationship. They tried to avoid one another as much as possible. It was obvious that there was serious tension between them. This animosity often boiled over in staff meetings. Tom opposed whatever position Jim took on an issue. The faculty and students sensed the tension in the air.

Near the end of the school year, a young pastor conducted a Week of Spiritual Emphasis at the school. The Spirit of God moved on the hearts of both the faculty and students in a marked way. At the end of the week, a Friday night foot-washing and Communion service took place. During the footwashing, Jim approached Tom and said, “Tom, may I wash your feet? I have been wrong in the way I have treated you this year. I am sorry.” Tom was stunned. The two embraced and participated in the footwashing together. Barriers between them were broken down. The atmosphere in the school changed dramatically. Brotherly love replaced animosity. Kindness replaced sharp competitiveness, and the grace of Christ united two estranged teachers. It took someone to make the first move, which Jim did.

Discuss With the Class: Why do you think it is so difficult to make the first move toward someone who has wronged you?

► STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. When Jesus Prayed for Unity *(Review John 17:11, 20–24 with your class.)*

Jesus knew that He would soon leave His disciples. Just before His crucifixion, He prayed that they would be one. You can feel the earnestness in His voice as you listen to Him praying, “that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (*John 17:21, NKJV*). Jesus prayed that His disciples would have the close relationship with one another that He had with His Father in heaven.

One of the greatest evidences that Christianity is real is the unity of Christ’s church. When people of varied backgrounds and cultures with differing opinions relate in loving unity, non-Christians take notice. In *The Acts of the Apostles*, Ellen G. White describes the experience of the disciples in these words, “In these first disciples was presented marked diversity. They were to be the world’s teachers, and they represented widely varied types of character. In order successfully to carry forward the work to which they had been called, these men, differing in natural characteristics and in habits of life, needed to come into unity of feeling, thought, and action. This unity it was Christ’s object to secure.”—Page 20.

Consider This: The disciples would not allow their different personality traits, their ways of viewing various issues, or their personal preferences to stand in the way of accomplishing Christ’s mission. Why do we feel uncomfortable, at times, around people who think differently from the way we do about some issues? What is the difference between unity and uniformity? For what does Christ pray?

II. Paul’s Illustration of Unity *(Review 1 Corinthians 12:12–18 with your class.)*

The Corinthian church had its share of problems. These issues included conflict between members, immorality and divorce, idolatry and lawsuits, the abuse of the Lord’s Supper and of the gift of tongues, and doctrinal heresy. One of the major issues in the church was the division between the members (*1 Cor. 1:10–12*). In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul explains that differences need not lead to division. Unity is not uniformity. Each member is part of the body of Christ. Just as the different organs of the body have different functions but each blends into the whole for the good of the body, each member of the church is gifted by

God to bless the entire body (*1 Cor. 12:12, 19–24*). There are many members yet one body (*vs. 20*). It is God who, according to His will, gifts each member for service (*vs. 11, 18*).

Consider This: The core message of 1 Corinthians 12 is that each member of the church has been placed in the body by Christ, is gifted by Christ, and, according to Christ, is necessary for a healthy, growing church. How does understanding the concept of spiritual gifts lead us to celebrate our diversity and embrace our differences?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The disciples focused upon accomplishing the task that Jesus gave them. They were committed to proclaiming His message of love to the world. Herein lies the main point of this week’s lesson: disunity disrupts mission. Conflict creates chaos, and Christ does not reign supreme in the midst of chaos.

Thought/Application Questions:

❶ Think of times when your strong opinions have created conflict in your home or church. What might you do to reduce the conflict?

❷ If you have strong negative feelings toward another person in the church, what can you do to repair the broken relationship, even if you are the one who was wronged?

- 3 How does personal involvement in the mission of the church foster unity?

► STEP 4—Create

Here are two imagined situations. Choose one and discuss the solution in small groups of two or three class members.

Situation 1: You hear that in a church nominating committee meeting your name came up to be considered for a position, such as a local elder or deaconess, but that one of the elders or members on the nominating committee made some very negative and disparaging remarks about you. How do you handle it? What do you do?

- a. Say nothing.
- b. Speak to the pastor about it.
- c. Go directly to the person.
- d. None of the above.

Situation 2: It is after church service, and a few people are standing around in small groups, talking. You happen to overhear someone make a very unkind remark about one of your friends. You know that what was said is not true. What do you do?

- a. Say nothing.
- b. Confront the people in the group.
- c. Tell your friend.
- d. None of the above.

Spend the last few minutes of class discussing the ways in which you can resolve conflicts when division arises. Close class with a prayer for the unity of the church. Leave your class with this thought: the mission of Christ will never be accomplished if the church is filled with conflict. Christ appeals to each one of us to unite in loving witness so that we can reach the world with His last-day message.