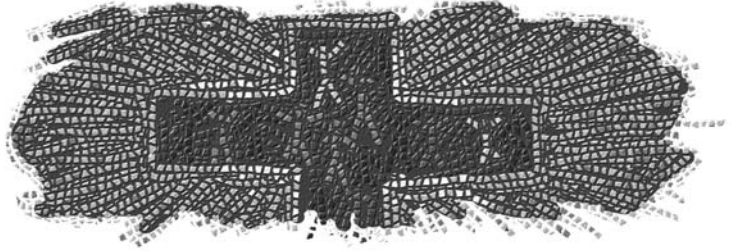


Unity Amid Diversity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 28:18-20, Rom. 12:6-8, 1 Cor. 12:28-31, Eph. 4:1-16.*

Memory Text: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (*Ephesians 4:4-6, NKJV*).

We have reached the midpoint of the Epistle. The first three chapters set forth the theology of Christian unity, a unity that overrides all the divisive factors in humankind. The last three chapters deal with the practical implications of that unity in the life of a Christian. So, Paul moves from theology to practice, from exposition to exhortation, from what God has done to what we should do in response to what God has done for us. Our theology must inform our morality, and our morality must reflect our theology.

Thus, Paul now turns his attention to the kind of life believers should live in accordance with the great theological insight of the mystery of Christ. The Jew/Gentile unity is no myth but a reality that demands a “walk worthy of the calling” (*Eph. 4:1, NKJV*).

The Week at a Glance: Why does Paul tell us to “walk worthy” of our calling? What does that mean? What kind of diversity will exist amid the unity that should be the hallmark of God’s church? What are the gifts given to individuals in the church? How does Paul describe growth in Christ?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 19.*

Walking Worthy *(Eph. 4:1-3)*

In the first three chapters, Paul talked so much about what God has done in Christ for us. Now, as a result, he tells us to “walk worthy” of our vocation, and he tells us how we should do that. What are the five graces foundational to Christian character, and what is your understanding of what each one means? (*Eph. 4:2, 3*). Compare what you wrote to what the lesson below says.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Lowliness or humility. Romans and Greeks considered humility as a sign of weakness, but to the Christian, it is a source of strength. It is the opposite of pride. Pride is at the center of disunity (e.g., Lucifer in heaven), whereas humility is at the core of reconciliation as in the Incarnation and the Cross (*Phil. 2:2-8*).

Gentleness or meekness is essential to the unity of the church. Being the denial of self-assertion, meekness does not react even in the face of provocation. In the end the meek will inherit the earth (*Matt. 5:5*).

Patience or longsuffering is a characteristic of God Himself. He is “longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (*2 Pet. 3:9, NKJV*). Patience means endurance in the face of affliction, refusal to avenge wrongs, and not giving up hope for repairing ruptured relationships.

“*Bearing with one another*” (*Eph. 4:2, NKJV*) means more than mutual tolerance. It involves understanding the other person and a willingness to forgive and accept one another.

All these graces, of course, are rooted in love, and it is this active practice of love that preserves relationships and promotes peace and unity in the Christian community and beyond.

Humility, gentleness, longsuffering, bearing with one another, and love—how well did you manifest any of these traits in the past week? If there were something you could do over again, what would it be? More important, how can you avoid making the same mistake again?

Key Text: *Ephesians 4:3-6*

Teachers Aims:

1. To demonstrate how God brings unity of the church from the real diversity of the individuals and groups within it.
2. To explore the diversity within the unity of the church.
3. To discuss the purposes of that diversity and how it helps to accomplish unity.

Lesson Outline:

I. Walking Worthy (*Eph. 4:1, 2*)

- A. In order for the church to live up to its calling, individuals in the church must cooperate with God.
- B. God's grace provides us with the character traits necessary to fulfill His purpose.
- C. These character traits arise from God's love manifested within believers.

II. Diversity, not Division (*Eph. 4:11*)

- A. Unity does not, in any sense, mean "sameness" or "enforced conformity."
- B. Each of us is given different gifts and personal qualities, all of which can be used by God to build the unity of the church.
- C. Gifts are the result of God's filling and transforming our personal strengths and qualities.

III. Equipped for Ministry (*Eph. 4:12*)

- A. Ministry, as discussed by Paul in Ephesians, does not strictly refer to the pastoral ministry.
- B. All church members are ministers, using their gifts to build the church and serve its mission.
- C. Gifts also are intended to help the recipient to grow spiritually in Christ.

Summary: God is a God of unity but also a God of variety. This can be seen in His creation. God has drawn people of all backgrounds, talents, temperaments, et cetera, to Him. In the human world, human variation is often viewed as a problem to overcome. God views it as an opportunity to make use of the entire human spectrum to take His message to the world.

COMMENTARY

"I point you to the words of the apostle Paul in the fourth chapter of Ephesians. This whole chapter is a lesson that God desires us to learn and practice."—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1117.

In Ephesians, chapter 4, Paul begins the practical application of the theology outlined in chapters 1–3. The action of God's grace must be followed by human response. "Therefore," Paul begins. Doctrine is not an empty rhetoric; it is the "therefore," the foundation,

Unity: Why Oneness? *(Eph. 4:4-6)*

Read Ephesians 4:4-6. What's the one crucial theme in these three verses, a theme we've already seen in this Epistle so far?

Ephesians 4:4-6 is one of the most majestic passages in the Bible. The structure of its construction, the grandeur of its prose, and the grounding of unity in the fullness of the Godhead are incredible. Should anyone dare ask the question “Why should Christians be one?” the answer comes in that unassailable argument: Because everything about Christian faith and life is one.

God has mandated the unity of the Christian body. *One God* through *one Christ* has redeemed us from sin, given to us *one faith*, regenerated us through *one Spirit*, made us members of *one body* through *one baptism*, and given to us *one eternal hope*.

As we study this sevenfold formula of oneness, another significant factor needs to be noted. The entire Godhead is involved in the oneness of the church. That is in keeping with the spirit of the Epistle, which often emphasizes the role of the Trinity in redemptive history.

God the Father—“who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (*Eph. 4:6, NKJV*). He is all in all.

God the Son—“the author and perfecter of our faith” (*Heb. 12:2, NIV*), “the hope of glory” (*Col. 1:27*), the foundation of the church, His body.

God the Holy Spirit—the agency of our new-birth experience, which leads us to baptism (*1 Cor. 12:13*).

“In the fourth chapter of Ephesians the plan of God is so plainly and simply revealed that all His children may lay hold upon the truth. Here the means which He has appointed to keep unity in His church, that its members may reveal to the world a healthy religious experience, is plainly declared.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1117.

“Satan separates. God unites. Love binds us together.” So said the famous evangelist Dwight L. Moody. No one would like to be an agent of Satan, and all of us would like to be instruments of God’s love. Why are the five graces talked about in yesterday’s lesson so crucial in order for us to experience this unity that is discussed in today’s lesson?

of Christian ethics and practice. The apostle calls that practice “the worthy walk” (*Eph. 4:1*). Ephesians 4:1-16 covers the characteristics, the purpose, and the empowerment of that walk.

I. The Christian Walk: Its Characteristics (*Eph. 4:1, 2*)

The apostle expects the believers’ response to God’s saving act to be “worthy of the calling you have received” (*vs. 1, NIV*). The Greek word for “worthy” (*axios*) refers to a balance. The Christian walk needs to be in balance with the calling.

Paul mentions four characteristics that contribute to this balance. *First, lowliness* or humility. Romans and Greeks never viewed the word *humility* in admiration but as descriptive of servility and subservience. Not so the Bible. Isaiah describes God as transcendent as well as immanent: “the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity” and One who dwells “with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit” (*Isa. 57:15*). It was the mind of humility that led Jesus to empty Himself and take the form of a servant and humble Himself to the point of death (*Phil. 2:5-8*). Humility—voluntary self-abnegation—is an indispensable part of the Christian life. It looks at life in a perspective of sinfulness and emptiness, the redeeming grace of Christ, and the all-embracing love of God, without whom life is not.

Second, meekness. Both Roman and Greek cultures considered, and most of today’s cultures concur, that meekness is a symbol of weakness. But in the Bible, meekness is inner strength, derived from a quality of gentleness. Not arrogant or condescending, meekness is gentle with others, sensitive to their weakness, and supportive of them so that they can climb higher. Moses reflected such a character. He was no spineless leader, but the Bible declares him to be the meekest man on earth (*Num. 12:3*). Did not Jesus say “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth” (*Matt. 5:5*)?

Third, longsuffering and forbearing. A natural pair, both words mean “patience.” God Himself has set an example of patience and longsuffering toward us (*2 Pet. 3:9*). Christian community and unity cannot exist in the absence of patience and tolerance. Patience involves bearing with one another, a readiness to forgive, a refusal to cross swords or take revenge, and a readiness to embrace love.

Fourth, love. The crown jewel that should mark the Christian walk is indeed basic to all others. It is the sum of all virtues. “The strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 470.

II. The Christian Walk: Its Purpose (*Eph. 4:2-7*)

A walk worthy of our calling is essential to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (*Eph. 4:3*). This unity of the Christian community—of Jews and Gentiles—is an inescapable mandate,

Unity: Diversity of Gifts *(1 Cor. 12:28-31, Eph. 4:7-11)*

Ephesians 4:6 speaks of God as the “Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (*NKJV*). The emphasis that we all have the same father stresses the unity of the church. Now in verse 7, Paul says that “to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (*NKJV*). All have not received the same gift, nor in the same measure (*vs. 11*). Thus, Paul turns from “all of us” (*vs. 6*) to “each one of us” (*vs. 7*)—and so from unity to diversity in the church. Diversity does not mean division; it means there are different gifts, and these gifts should be used for the unity of the church. After all, the same Spirit that distributes the gifts allows us to work together for the strengthening and building of God’s church.

Read Ephesians 4:7-11. What is Paul telling us here? How do these words help us understand the gifts He has given us?

“When He ascended on high” (*vs. 8, NKJV*), He gave gifts to the believers; that is, when He ascended to heaven, He poured out the Spirit on the earth. But what are we to understand by verse 9, where Paul states: “He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth” (*NKJV*)? The contrast between “ascended” and “descended” is not spatial but theological. His ascent and exaltation to the presence of God is contrasted with His descent to, and deepest humiliation of, the Cross (*Phil. 2:5-11*). The victory in the descent and the exaltation in the ascent are celebrated by the giving of the gifts to the church, whose members Christ has plucked from the prince of darkness. By His victory over Satan and His ascent to “far above all the heavens” (*Eph. 4:10, NKJV*), Christ fills all things. He is the Lord of the universe and yet linked closely with the church on earth and fills her with His gifts.

Name the gifts listed in Ephesians 4:11. Compare these with gifts mentioned in Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28-31. What does Paul say about the nature and use of gifts? At the same time, ask yourself, “What is my gift? How have I used it recently? What practical ways can I enhance my gift in order to make it more effective in the Lord’s work?”

because everything about the gospel is one. Paul repeats the formula of one seven times and applies it to the church, the Holy Spirit, the hope, the Lord, the faith, the baptism, and God the Father. The entire Godhead is involved in creating the oneness of the faith, hope, baptism, and the church as a cosmic exhibit of God's victory over the spirit of division that Satan introduced into the universe at the beginning of the great controversy. The least we, as members of the body of Christ—the church—can do is to remain united and loyal to God's eternal purposes.

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *John 17:11, 22, 23; Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:28-31; Ephesians 4:1-16; 1 Peter 4:7-11*

❶ Walking requires forward motion. Why would Paul use this concept when addressing the practical implications of the Christian journey? (*See Eph. 4:1-3.*) Paul presents five “steps,” or attributes, that reflect our calling in Christ. Discuss the impact of each one. How does living these attributes help make the gospel more appealing to non-Christians?

❷ The concept of oneness is foreign to our natures and society. We each have a “better idea.” In what ways does Ephesians 4:4-6 use the concept of “one”? Discuss how unity in these areas impacts the testimony of the church (*see also John 17:11, 22, 23*). Why is it so easy for us to fall prey to divisions and conflicting ideologies? How does God heal divisions? Share a season of prayer asking for “the unity of the Spirit” (*Eph. 4:3, NIV*) in your church.

❸ Discuss the phrase *unity in diversity*. How do the spiritual gifts listed in Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:28-31, Ephesians 4:7-11 make unity in diversity possible? Also read 1 Peter 4:7-11. Why is it essential that we each know and practice our spiritual gifts? Discuss how your class can be a catalyst to help every church member discover and use their gifts.

❹ Newly planted young trees are anchored with ropes until their root system develops. Reread Ephesians 4:13-16. Why is it so important that we be fully committed to God? Where do we find truth solid enough to keep us thoroughly grounded, no matter what storm or strange doctrine develops? How can you learn to be discerning when confronted with new ideologies?

Unity: Equipped for the Ministry *(Eph. 4:12, 13)*

We have just been studying the gifts the Lord has given His church. Paul then lists, in Ephesians 4:12, two reasons for those gifts. What are they? How do they relate to each other?

The first deals with “the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry” (*NKJV*). The Greek for “equipping” comes from a word that means “to put right,” such as mending a torn net (*Matt. 4:21*) or setting a broken bone. Thus, “equipping of the saints” refers to preparing, training, and making them ready for the service to which they are called.

This raises the question, Who are the ministers of the church? According to the New Testament, all Christians are ministers, commissioned by the Lord Himself to go, make disciples of all nations, baptize, and teach (*Matt. 28:18-20*). The work of the ministry is not committed to a privileged few (clergy) but to all who profess the name of Christ. The Christian ministry is a people-to-people, one-to-one, ministry. No church member can claim exemption from the ministry, and no clergy person can claim exclusive privilege to the ministry.

The second reason for the giving of the gifts is “for the edifying of the body of Christ” (*Eph. 4:12, NKJV*). Whatever gifts we have—teaching, preaching, evangelism, healing, counseling, visiting, comforting, helping—are not to be hoarded for personal use. They are for the corporate good and growth of the church, and the hoarders will have their gifts taken from them (*Matt. 25:24-30*). The church can grow only when its members love and care for one another and together reach out to the surrounding community with the grace and love of Christ. Ministry of all members will hasten the day when the entire globe will be encircled by the saving message of Christ. In this way the church will exercise “the unity of the faith” and will receive the “fullness of Christ” (*Eph. 4:13, NKJV*). A person filled with Christ cannot remain silent when someone out there is without Christ. That is the motive of ministry.

Imagine what your local church would be like if everyone, using his or her gifts, were involved in the work of ministry. What can you do to help move your church toward this gospel ideal?

III. The Christian Walk: Its Empowerment (*Eph. 4:11-16*)

How are we to walk worthy of our calling? The risen Jesus, after ascending to His Father, has not left us without help. He has given us gifts so that we, as a believing community, can not only walk in His way faithfully but accomplish His mission (*Eph. 4:8-11*). The gifts are many, and Paul names only a few—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers—but the purpose and function of all spiritual gifts remain the same: “For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (*vs. 12*).

In exercising the varied gifts, we need to remember that we are the saints, we are the ministers, and we, together, constitute the body of Christ. As such, our vocation and our “worthy walk” must take us to a greater maturity “unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (*Eph. 4:13*).

Witnessing

What might the impact be on you, and others, if during the coming week you engage in something similar to the following:

1. Volunteer one afternoon at the community HIV/AIDS center.
2. Offer to babysit your next-door neighbor’s two-year-old so the child’s single mom can attend a much-needed job interview.
3. Join the one-evening-per-week tutoring program for inner-city kids at the local youth center.
4. Visit one afternoon with a terminally ill person under hospice care.
5. Repair the front porch steps of an elderly man living alone down the street.
6. Invite the family who just moved into the neighborhood to attend church with you on Sabbath and stay for fellowship dinner.

We have the life of Jesus here on earth as our example: He fed the people, soothed their physical wounds, washed the feet of His disciples, sat with the littlest ones, enjoyed telling stories, took time to *listen*, and, most important, never missed an opportunity to share His Father’s love and the plan of salvation. He knew that the best way to reach people, to pry open their mind and heart was to appeal to what they *knew* and *understood*, what personally touched them and affected their daily lives.

This coming week, think of a way you can be involved, a way you can reach out to others in your office or community. Then actually do it; and as you do it, take note of the impact your involvement is having on you and those you are helping. Ask God to help you make such activities a part of your life.

Unity: Growing Up in Christ *(Eph. 4:14-16)*

Ephesians 4:12, 13 closes with the note that spiritual gifts are given not only to equip the saints for the ministry of the church but also to lead them to the “measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (*NKJV*). Coming to Christ, experiencing the unity that transcends all divisions and being equipped for the ministry are not enough. Christians must grow in Christ. Verses 14-16 outline elements of such growth. (Verses 17-32, our study next week, continue to define this growth to emphasize living as the new person in full maturity.)

Ephesians 4:14 says we should “be no more children.” How do we understand this with Christ’s words in Matthew 18:3?

God wants us to be childlike but not childish. He expects us to “put away childish things” (*1 Cor. 13:11*) and assert the maturity of adulthood with which one can make a distinction between the spiritual and the worldly and take solid food instead of milk (*1 Cor. 3:2*).

What else is Paul warning us about in verse 14? How well have you fared in this area?

Firmness involves stability in what we believe, in how we sift truth from error, and in not being deceived by those who claim to have the truth. It requires strong grounding in God’s Word so that when the “trickery,” “craftiness,” and “plotting” (*Eph. 4:14, NKJV*) confront us, we may stand firm on God’s testimony (*Isa. 8:20*).

Paul also talks about “speaking the truth in love” (*Eph. 4:15*). Literally, it is doing the truth. And doing it in love. The church must distinguish between the gospel and heresy, and even here truth must put on love. “Truth becomes hard if it is not softened by love; love becomes soft if it is not strengthened by truth.”—John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, p. 172.

Finally, the ultimate sign of growth is unreserved commitment and obedience to Christ. We are the body, and every part and function of the body must be linked to, and integrated in, Christ.

Is “truth” still “truth” even if spoken in harshness? Defend your answer.

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Babies attract us. They are our offspring and our hope. What did you look like as a baby? Share one story your parents told you about something cute you did as a very little child. Why is it important that we “no longer be infants” (*Eph. 4:14, NIV*)? Compare your spiritual journey now with when it began. How have you matured in your walk with Jesus?

Thought Questions:

❶ Ephesians 4:2 reflects Galatians 5:22, 23, where Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit. How is it possible for humans to change from being self-centered and egotistical to people who are patient and kind, even when wrongly accused? What does it mean to be “completely humble and gentle” (*Eph. 4:2, NIV*)? If your family or church community were describing your personality, what adjectives would they use?

❷ Do a word study on *unity* in the Bible. Jesus’ concern and prayer for His disciples is that they be one as a testimony to the world of the gospel’s power to change lives. See *John 17:11, 22, 23*. Paul echoes this profound concept, urging us to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (*Eph. 4:3, NIV*). Why are there so many divisions of faith and practice? How has this condition in our society affected the fulfillment of the gospel commission? How can your local church change your city’s perception of Christianity?

Application Question:

The concept of spiritual gifts is so important to Paul that he mentions them in three Epistles. (See *Rom. 12:6-8, 1 Cor. 12:28-31, Eph. 4:11-13*.) How are spiritual gifts different from a person’s natural talents? Why must people be prepared “for works of service” (*Eph. 4:12, NIV*)? Do you know your spiritual gifts? If you do not, how can you discover them? If you do understand the special ways in which God has gifted you to serve, how does your current role in the church match your giftedness? How are you “cheerfully” advancing the kingdom of God? (See *Rom. 12:8, NIV*)

Further Study: *Spiritual gifts.* “It is the absence of the Spirit that makes the gospel ministry so powerless. Learning, talents, eloquence, every natural or acquired endowment, may be possessed; but without the presence of the Spirit of God, no heart will be touched, no sinner be won to Christ. On the other hand, if they are connected with Christ, if the gifts of the Spirit are theirs, the poorest and most ignorant of His disciples will have a power that will tell upon hearts. God makes them the channel for the outworking of the highest influence in the universe.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 328.

Christian growth. “The germination of the seed represents the beginning of spiritual life, and the development of the plant is a beautiful figure of Christian growth. As in nature, so in grace; there can be no life without growth. The plant must either grow or die. As its growth is silent and imperceptible, but continuous, so is the development of the Christian life. At every stage of development our life may be perfect; yet if God’s purpose for us is fulfilled, there will be continual advancement. . . . We shall become strong to bear responsibility, and our maturity will be in proportion to our privileges.”—Pages 65, 66.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Discuss in class the question asked at the end of Thursday’s lesson.
- ❷ Look at the Ellen White quote above where she says that at every stage of development we may be “perfect.” What does that mean?
- ❸ Read again Ephesians 4:14. How important is doctrinal purity to Paul? As a class, talk about how much importance should be placed on doctrine. In what ways might we be guilty of over-emphasizing or underemphasizing doctrine?
- ❹ Suppose someone were to say to you, “How do I discover what my spiritual gift is?” How would you answer them? In general, how are we able to discover what our gifts are?