

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, or 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 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 had 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 were dramatically changed. 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:

- 1 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.
- 2 In class, answer the question: Why am I a Seventh-day Adventist?
- 3 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?
- 4 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?
- 5 Why is unity so crucial for any revival and reformation among us?

The Disobedient Daughter

Irunga stepped outside the mud hut that was her father's home. She had hoped that he would understand that becoming a Christian didn't mean she was rejecting her family's traditions. She loved her family, but now God was more important.

Irunga is a Herero, a tribal people living in northern Namibia. She grew up watching her grandfather sit before the holy fire and talk to the ancestors, asking them to tell God the family's concerns.

When she was ten years old, she went to live with her uncle and attend school in the little town nearest to her family's settlement. While studying, she attended a Protestant church and accepted Jesus as her Savior. She knew that her family would be unhappy, but when her grandfather accused her of deserting their culture, she was deeply hurt. They called her a disobedient daughter. Saddened, Irunga returned to town.

A friend introduced her to some Seventh-day Adventist missionaries and their interpreter, Kapitango. Irunga enjoyed talking with the missionaries, but she had no intention of becoming a Seventh-day Adventist. However, as her friendship with Kapitango grew, so did her interest in his faith. In time she accepted the Seventh-day Adventist faith, and the young couple decided to marry. But marriage in Irunga's culture is complicated, and parents often take years to decide to allow their young people to marry.

Kapitango's parents asked Irunga's parents for permission for the couple to marry, and they agreed. But just before the wedding, they withdrew their permission. Kapitango and Irunga decided to marry anyway.

Religion continues to be a wedge between Irunga and her family, who still refuse to listen to her testimony. But Irunga hopes that one day they will share her love for Jesus. She is her village's only contact with Seventh-day Adventists.

Irunga and her pastor-husband work with a group of Seventh-day Adventist missionaries to reach the Herero and Himba people of Namibia. They are developing Bible stories told in the oral traditions of her people. The stories, recorded onto MP3 players, are making a difference in people's lives, and Irunga hopes that one day soon they will reach her own family.

Part of a recent Thirteenth Sabbath Offering has gone to help make these MP3 players available to more Himba and Herero people so that they can hear for themselves that God is not distant or uncaring but loving and forgiving.

Thank you for giving to missions and the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering and making it possible for others to hear the story of salvation for themselves.

IRUNGA NDJAMBA *shares her faith in northern Namibia.*