

The Church



SABBATH—AUGUST 16

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 28:1; John 17; John 15:1–5; Matthew 7:1–5; Matthew 5:23, 24; Matthew 18:15–18.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘I do not pray only for them. I pray also for those who will believe in me because of their message. Father, I pray that all of them will be one, just as you are in me and I am in you. I want them also to be in us. Then the world will believe that you have sent me’ ” (John 17:20, 21, NIV).

THE ROOTS OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH GO BACK TO ADAM, ABRAHAM, AND THE SONS OF ISRAEL. The Lord had asked Abraham, and later the Israelites, to join Him in a very close relationship. In this way God could bless the world through them. Throughout the history of the Bible, that close relationship was continued by the church.

The church was not an invention of the apostles (teachers and leaders) or of other humans. During His ministry (work done for God), Christ Himself announced His plan to start His church: “ ‘I will build My church’ ” (Matthew 16:18, NKJV). The church owes its life to Jesus Christ. He is its Founder (Starter).

According to the Gospels, the word *church* appears on the lips of Jesus only three times (Matthew 16:18; Matthew 18:17). But this does not mean that Jesus did not deal with the subject. In fact, He taught very important ideas for the church. Our study this week will center on two main ideas: the foundation (beginning) of the church and the unity (oneness with God and with one another) of the church.

THE FOUNDATION (BEGINNING) OF THE CHURCH (Deuteronomy 32:4)



Jesus is the living Rock of all our beliefs.

Jesus said, “ ‘On this rock I will build My church’ ” (Matthew 16:18, NKJV). Who is the *rock* (*petra* in Greek) upon which the church is built? Some interpreters believe that Peter is the rock. They argue that the Lord used a play on words between *Peter* and *rock* (*Petros* and *petra* in Greek). These words would be clearer in the Aramaic language,¹ which Jesus probably used. But nobody really knows the exact wording of what Jesus said in Aramaic. We have only the Greek language shown by Matthew. This shows the difference between *Petros* (stone) and *petra* (rock). This difference should not be overlooked.

There are good reasons to believe that *petra* means Christ. The real meaning of Jesus’ comment (Matthew 16:13–20) centers on who He was and on His work, not Peter’s. Jesus had used the image (example) of building upon a rock. This word-picture clearly shows the rock as Himself and His teachings (Matthew 7:24, 25).

**What is the meaning of “rock” in the Old Testament?
Read Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 28:1; Psalm 31:2, 3;
Psalm 42:9; Psalm 62:2; and Isaiah 17:10.**

Peter and the other apostles heard Jesus speaking of building His church on a rock. They would have interpreted the Old Testament meaning of the rock as a symbol of God.

Peter himself supported the idea that Christ is “ ‘the stone [rock] you builders did not accept. But it has become the most important stone of all’ ” (Acts 4:11, NIV). And Peter pointed the word *rock* to Christ as the foundation (basis; beginning) of the church (1 Peter 2:4–8). While Peter compared² Christians in general to “living stones,” he used the word *rock* (*petra*) to mean Christ alone. In the Bible no person is called *petra* except Jesus.

The apostle Paul used the word *petra* to mean Christ too (Romans 9:33; 1 Corinthians 10:4). Paul boldly said that “no one can lay any other foundation than the one that has already been laid. That foundation is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11, NIV).

Why is it important to know that the church, weak as it sometimes may seem, is founded (based) upon Christ Himself?

DEFINITIONS

1. Aramaic language—popular language used by the Jewish people during Jesus’ time.

2. compared—to have shown how two or more things are the same or different.

CHRIST'S PRAYER FOR UNITY (John 17)

It was Thursday night. After the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples went toward the Mount of Olives. On their way to Gethsemane, Jesus stopped and prayed for Himself, for His disciples, and for all who later would believe in Him through the apostles' preaching. The suffering of the cross was ahead of Him. But He was most concerned about His followers, not about Himself. John 17 records Jesus' longest intercessory³ prayer. It is encouraging to think that He prayed for everyone who believes in Him, including each of us.

Read John 17. What was the subject of Jesus' prayer to the Father about the believers? Read especially verses 21–23.

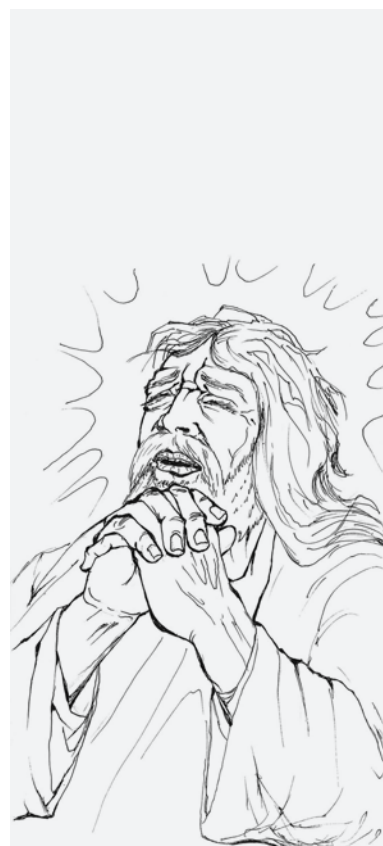
Unity is important for the life of the church. We know it is very important because four times Christ prayed that His followers may be one (John 17:11, 21–23). In that special last hour, the Lord could have prayed for many other very important and necessary things. But He focused His prayer on the unity of the believers. He knew that the greatest danger would be for members of the church to quarrel and become divided.

Jesus' prayer is for a unity that is almost the same as His relationship with the Father. He and the Father are Two Persons, separate from Each Other, with different responsibilities. But They are One in nature and purpose. In the same way, we all have different thoughts, feelings, backgrounds, abilities, and different kinds of work. But we all should be united (joined as one) in Jesus Christ.

This kind of unity does not just happen. In order to have it, we must fully accept the fact that Christ is Lord of our lives. He must shape our characters (our thoughts, feelings, and actions), and we must surrender our will to His will.

This unity is not a goal in itself. It is meant to inspire (cause) the world to believe in Christ as the Savior sent by the Father. Peace and unity among men of different backgrounds and thoughts is the strongest witness possible that God has sent His Son to save sinners. It is strong proof of Christ's saving and life-changing power. And we have the honor of giving this witness.

Many times unity is threatened by nothing other than selfishness. How can we make sure that we are not guilty of spoiling unity for no good reason?



Jesus prayed for everyone who believes in Him, including us.

DEFINITIONS

3. intercessory—working or praying for others.

CHRIST'S GIFT FOR UNITY (John 15:1–5)

What is the basis (reason) for the unity that Jesus prayed about for His church? Read John 17:23 and John 15:1–5.

“‘You in Me, and I in you’ ” (John 14:20, NKJV) shows the close relationship we need to have with Jesus. Jesus in our hearts encourages unity. He brings to our lives two things that are very important for unity: God’s Word (the Bible) and His love.

If we have Jesus, we will also have His words. They are really the words of the Father (John 14:24; John 17:8, 14). Jesus is “the truth” (John 14:6), and the Word of the Father “is truth” too (John 17:17). Unity in Jesus means unity in the Word of God (the Bible). To have unity, we need to agree that the truth is given in the Word of God. If we try to have unity without following Bible beliefs, we are sure to fail.

The Lord also wants His followers to be united by true love. If we have Jesus, we will have the perfect love the Father has for the Son (verse 26). This love is not a passing emotion or feeling. Instead, it is a living and permanent principle (important rule) of action. In order to have true love, we must have less of self and more of Jesus. Our selfish pride must die, and Jesus must live in us. Then we will truly love one another. This makes the perfect unity that Jesus prayed for possible.

“Those who claim to believe the truth are made holy through the truth when they learn to be like Christ. Then there will be complete and perfect unity in the church.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*[®], September 19, 1900.

It has not always been easy to keep a high view of truth and to have deep love for one another at the same time. There is always the problem of paying too much attention to one and not enough to the other. There was a time when doctrine (beliefs and teachings) alone seemed the most important part of unity. Fortunately, this lack of balance has been taken care of. But today we run the risk of going to the other end. We think that love is more important than truth in order to obtain unity. We need to remember that love without truth is blind. And truth without love is fruitless. Mind and heart must work together.

The early Christian church showed the unity for which Christ prayed. “The believers studied what the apostles taught [doctrines]. They shared life together [fellowship; love]. They broke bread and ate together. And they prayed” (Acts 2:42, NIV).



Pride must die so that Jesus may live in us.

A GREAT DANGER TO UNITY (Matthew 7:1–5)

How can Jesus' words in Matthew 7:1–5 help us to avoid quarreling within the church?

It is much easier to see the faults in others than to see our own. To criticize someone else means we think we are better than those whom we criticize. This is because the critic compares himself or herself with other human beings who seem to be worse than he or she is. But our goal is not to compare ourselves with others but with Jesus.

On the other hand, there are times when it is necessary to speak about another person. But before we do that we should ask ourselves three questions:

1. *Is what I am about to say true?* “You shall not bear false witness [lie] against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16, NKJV). Sometimes we may report something as a fact while it is really just a guess. Sometimes we may without thinking add our own opinions. If we do, we may run the risk of judging other people wrongly.

2. *Is what I am about to say positive?* Will it be helpful for those who hear it? Paul warns us to speak only “what will help to build others up and meet their needs” (Ephesians 4:29, NIV). If something were true but not positive, it would be better *not* to say it.

3. *Is it possible to say it in a loving way?* The way we say something is as important as *what* we say (read Proverbs 25:11). If it is true and positive, we have to be sure that we can say it in a way that will not insult other people.

James compares the tongue to a little fire that burns a great forest (James 3:5, 6). If we hear gossip, we should not add more wood to the fire by spreading it, because “if you don't [do not] have wood, your fire goes out. If you don't [do not] talk about others, arguing dies down” (Proverbs 26:20, NIV). Gossip requires a chain of listeners and talkers to be alive. We can stop it by simply refusing to hear it. Or, if we have already heard it, we do not have to share it. “Instead of gossiping, which causes mischief [harm], let us tell of the limitless power of Christ, and speak of His glory [praise and honor].” —Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Upward Look*, page 306.

There is no doubt about it, criticism of others can make us feel better about ourselves. But what happens when we compare ourselves with Jesus?



Ask yourself before you speak: Is it true? Is it positive? Is it kind?

THE RETURN OF UNITY (Matthew 5:23, 24)

Why is it necessary to make peace with a brother or sister we have wounded or hurt? Read Matthew 5:23, 24.

There were different kinds of offerings brought to the altar. But Jesus was probably talking about an animal sacrificed (put to death) so the sinner could receive God's forgiveness. But before we can receive God's pardon, we must make things right with others. Making peace requires a humble recognition of our faults. Without this attitude, how could we ask for God's forgiveness?

What three steps should we follow if someone has hurt us? Read Matthew 18:15–18.

Jesus tells us that we should speak to the person who has done wrong to us instead of telling others about it. We are not to criticize others but to show them their faults and invite them to repent (turn back to God) (Leviticus 19:17). With a spirit of humble love, we should try to help them see their mistakes. We should invite them to repent and apologize. It is very important not to put them to shame by telling their errors to others. That would make their recovery much more difficult.

The private conversation will lead to repentance⁴ and peace. But if the guilty person does not admit his or her wrongdoing, the next action is to take one or two witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15) to urge the erring person (the person who has made the mistake) to repent. The witnesses should not be involved in the situation, so that they may be in a better position to call him or her to repentance.

Finally, if the first two talks fail, we should tell it to the church. We should not do this to punish the erring person but to help him or her to repent. From the beginning, the whole method has a goal: to save the erring person (Galatians 6:1).

We should remember that bringing a guilty person back to God is the best way to bring healing to everyone involved in a quarrel. When someone has hurt us, why do we so often *not* follow the method that Jesus gave? How can we learn to not let a desire for revenge make our thinking unclear?

DEFINITIONS

4. repentance—feeling sorry for the mistakes made.

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Ellen G. White, “Christian Unity,” pages 236–248, in *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 5; “One With Christ in God,” pages 239–243, in *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 8.

“Union is strength. Being divided is weakness. When those who believe present truth are united, they give a positive influence. Satan well understands this. He was always most determined to destroy God’s truth by causing bitterness and quarreling among the Lord’s people.” —Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 5, page 236.

“We should try to think well of all men, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ, until we are forced to think differently. We should not accept bad reports too quickly. These are often the result of jealousy or misunderstanding. Or they may come from partial lies or the twisting of facts.” —Adapted from *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 5, page 58.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 How do you deal with people kindly, even though they think differently? How do you deal with people who are harsh and unloving toward anyone who does not agree with them?
- 2 Unity is very important to the Christian church. But how well has that unity been kept? How do you think a non-Christian looking at Christianity would understand the idea of “Christian unity”?
- 3 Jesus teaches us to forgive those who hurt us. But what if they have not repented and do not ask us to forgive them? How are we to act toward them?
- 4 What is the relationship between love and discipline (punishment)?
- 5 The ecumenical movement (unity among different churches) claims to create the unity that Christ prayed for. Their reasons might be good. But what problems can you see with the ecumenical movement besides the issues concerning last day events?
- 6 “We should try to think well of all men, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ, until we are forced to think differently.” How should we understand that sentence?