

Causes of Disunity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Deut. 28:1–14, Jer. 3:14–18, Judg. 17:6, 1 Kings 12:1–16, 1 Cor. 1:10–17, Acts 20:25–31.*

Memory Text: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (*Proverbs 9:10, NKJV*).

Old Testament prophets repeatedly called upon the people of Israel to obey God's instructions. Disobedience and carelessness would lead to apostasy and disunity. Obedience to God's laws was intended as a means to preserve the people from the natural consequences of sin and to sanctify them in the midst of many foreign nations. Following God's will would create harmony among the people and strengthen their community resolve to withstand the inroads of the pagan and evil worship practices that surrounded them from almost every direction. God's intention was for His people to be holy and to be a witness to the nations around them.

As the Lord said to them after delivering the Hebrews from Egypt: “Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’” (*Deut. 4:5, 6, NKJV*).

No question: were they to remain faithful, His people would be greatly blessed and would have been a blessing to others. Unfaithfulness, though, would lead to a host of problems, disunity being just one of many.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 13.

“Return, O Backsliding Children”

The history of the people of Israel is filled with stories of disobedience and anarchy, followed by a return to God and obedience, and then followed again with more disobedience and conflicts. This pattern repeats itself again and again. Each time God’s people consciously followed His will, they were blessed with peace and life. Each time they disobeyed and followed their own ways, their lives became miserable, filled with wars and conflicts. Even before Israel entered the Promised Land, God had predicted this pattern and offered the solution to avoid such dire consequences to their existence.

Read Deuteronomy 28:1–14. What blessings would come to Israel if the people were obedient to God’s will?

Read Jeremiah 3:14–18. What do we learn from God’s call to Israel to repent and return to Him? What does it tell us about God’s love and patience for His people?

What is amazing in the book of Jeremiah is how God is seen as loving, merciful, and generous toward His people in spite of their rebellion, division, and idolatry. God constantly is inviting His people to return to Him and to repent from their wayward actions. Again and again God promised restoration and hope for the future.

“ ‘Return, backsliding Israel,’ says the LORD; ‘I will not cause My anger to fall on you. For I am merciful,’ says the LORD; ‘I will not remain angry forever. Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God, and have scattered your charms to alien deities under every green tree, and you have not obeyed My voice,’ says the LORD’ ” (*Jer. 3:12, 13, NKJV*).

Jeremiah’s words were spoken at a time of general neglect of God’s Word. Although some reforms were started in the time of King Josiah, most people felt no spiritual urge to continue in faithful obedience to God. Their sins, idolatry, and self-centered lives were causing spiritual and political ruin. The more they regressed from doing God’s will, the more dreadful would be their future prospects. Yet, through Jeremiah, God pleaded with them. God had a better future in mind for them, and He longed to bring them back to prosperity, unity, and health. But this could come only if they would live by faith and all that true faith entails.

What has the difference between obedience and disobedience meant in your own life?

“Right in His Own Eyes”

Stories from the book of Judges show the numerous negative consequences of Israel not following the Lord’s will. Soon after Israel entered into Canaan, people began to pattern their spiritual lives on the false religions of the Canaanites surrounding them—exactly what they were told not to do! Unfortunately, that wasn’t the only problem they were facing either.

Read Judges 17:6 and Judges 21:25. What do these verses teach about more problems that arose among God’s people?

Talk about a recipe for division and disunity among God’s people. The unity of the nation was to be found in their loyal obedience to the Lord of the covenant, the covenant that they had entered into with God. By doing, however, what was right in their own eyes—especially as they were being influenced by the surrounding nations—they were on the sure road to disaster. We are all fallen beings, and if left to our own devices, if left to follow the inclinations of our hearts, we’ll surely wander from the path that God calls us to walk on.

What do the following passages tell us about the spiritual and social conditions of Israel during the time of the judges?

Judg. 2:11–13 _____

Judg. 3:5–7 _____

“The Lord had through Moses set before His people the result of unfaithfulness. By refusing to keep His covenant, they would cut themselves off from the life of God, and His blessing could not come upon them. At times these warnings were heeded, and rich blessings were bestowed upon the Jewish nation and through them upon surrounding peoples. But more often in their history they forgot God and lost sight of their high privilege as His representatives. They robbed Him of the service He required of them, and they robbed their fellow men of religious guidance and a holy example. They desired to appropriate to themselves the fruits of the vineyard over which they had been made stewards. Their covetousness and greed caused them to be despised even by the heathen. Thus the Gentile world was given occasion to misinterpret the character of God and the laws of His kingdom.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 20, 21.

How do our own actions as a church impact those around us? What do they see in Seventh-day Adventists that would impress them in a positive manner?

The Division of the Hebrew Nation

The path of apostasy, and its dire consequences, didn't happen overnight. But the wrong choices and decisions that accumulated over the long centuries finally led to some terrible consequences for God's people.

Read the story of King Rehoboam in 1 Kings 12:1–16. What caused this terrible division among God's people?

“Had Rehoboam and his inexperienced counselors understood the divine will concerning Israel, they would have listened to the request of the people for decided reforms in the administration of the government. But in the hour of opportunity that came to them during the meeting in Shechem, they failed to reason from cause to effect, and thus forever weakened their influence over a large number of the people. Their expressed determination to perpetuate and add to the oppression introduced during Solomon's reign was in direct conflict with God's plan for Israel, and gave the people ample occasion to doubt the sincerity of their motives. In this unwise and unfeeling attempt to exercise power, the king and his chosen counselors revealed the pride of position and authority.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 90.

What do the following statements say about the need for wisdom in making the right decisions? Where is the source of true wisdom?

Prov. 4:1–9 _____

Prov. 9:10 _____

James 1:5 _____

The story of Rehoboam and his rash and unwise decision to impose more conscripted labor on his people is a sad event in the life of the kingdom of Israel. The king sought counsel from two groups of advisors, but his final decision to follow the counsel of less experienced young men his own age brought a catastrophe on the kingdom that his father Solomon and grandfather David had built during the preceding 80 years. The advice that the king should intimidate the crowd by declaring that he is tougher than his father was foolish counsel. The young advisors believed that to be sympathetic of the people's demands for less rigorous labor was not the leadership style the king should adopt. He should, they said, present himself as ruthless and cruel instead. In the end, he showed himself to be a bully and undeserving of his people's allegiance and faithfulness. Hence, a division occurred among God's people that never should have been there and that was never God's plan for His people.

Schism in Corinth

Unfortunately, the issue of disunity among God's people didn't end even in New Testament times.

For example, the first four chapters of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians are an appeal for unity. While in Ephesus Paul heard that various divisions had erupted in the church at Corinth. Thus, he begins his letter with a lengthy address on church unity and the need to avoid schism. Paul is concerned about this development, and he seeks to provide inspired counsel to remedy this unfortunate situation.

According to 1 Corinthians 1:10–17, what seems to have been the cause of disunity, of their divisions and quarrels?

Paul became concerned for his brothers and sisters in Corinth when someone from Chloe's people told him about the divisions and quarrels among them. His opening words show the depth of his concern: "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you." His solution was to remind them that, as Christians, they were to be joined together "in the same mind and in the same judgment" (*1 Cor. 1:10, NKJV*). Whatever exactly was causing this contention and division, Paul wanted it stopped.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that Christians are called to follow Christ, not a human being—however talented or gifted or called that person may be. While they seemed to have divided themselves along "party" lines, the apostle stated unequivocally that such divisiveness was not according to Christ's will. He asserted that Christian unity is centered on Christ and His sacrifice on the cross (*1 Cor. 1:13*).

Christian unity finds its source in the truth as it is found in Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and in no one else, no matter how "worthy" a mentor or preacher or leader that person might be. At the foot of the cross we are all on the same level ground. Our baptism is into Jesus, who alone can cleanse us from sin. However, we must work toward this unity in Christ in practical ways.

What this should say to us is that as Seventh-day Adventists, we cannot take for granted our unity of faith and mission. Divisions and quarrels can undermine the unity of our church today unless the love and lordship of Christ unites us to Him.

How can we learn to avoid the kind of dangers that Paul was dealing with here? Why must we always be careful about how much loyalty we give to any person other than Christ?

“Wolves Will Come”

Read Acts 20:25–31. What did Paul warn the Ephesian elders about? What were they to do to prevent this from happening?

During his ministry Paul often faced opposition, and he knew that it would be difficult to preserve the purity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In his farewell to the Ephesian elders he drew from the watchman analogy in Ezekiel 33:1–6 to tell fellow leaders that they also were responsible for safeguarding the gospel. They were to be faithful shepherds of their congregations.

Paul’s use of the expression “savage wolves” to describe false teachers (*Acts 20:29, NKJV*) is reminiscent of Jesus’ similar warning that false teachers would disguise themselves in sheep’s clothing (*Matt. 7:15*). These false teachers did arise soon after Paul spoke this warning, and they preyed upon believers in the Asian churches that he had established. In Ephesians 5:6–14 and Colossians 2:8, we see some of Paul’s warnings to churches in Asia Minor.

In his Second Epistle to Timothy, Paul also warns Timothy, who is responsible for the church at Ephesus, against errors in the church and godlessness in the last days.

Read 2 Timothy 2:14–19 and 3:12–17. What does Paul say to Timothy about how to counter false teachers and to preserve the unity of the church?

First, Timothy should know his Bible, “rightly dividing the word of truth” (*2 Tim. 2:15, NKJV*). The antidote to these useless disputes and speculations is to correctly understand and teach the Word given by God. The truths of the Bible must be rightly interpreted so that no part of the Scriptures will be set in opposition to the entire picture presented in the Bible, and also to prevent misinterpretations that may cause one to lose faith in Jesus. Irrelevancies and secondary issues are to be subordinated to the principles of God’s Word that actually will prepare believers to live a victorious life in Christ. Paul’s second recommendation is for Timothy himself to “shun profane and idle babblings” (*2 Tim. 2:16, NKJV*). Trivial and speculative topics are not to be part of Timothy’s teaching ministry if he is to be considered a worthy and faithful minister. These types of conversations lead only to more ungodliness and do not edify the faith of believers (*2 Tim. 2:16*). Truth alone leads to godliness and harmony among believers. The reason Timothy must avoid and urge his people to avoid such errors is that they sweep through the church like a disease (*2 Tim. 2:17*). In the end, obedience to the Word of God is the antidote to false teaching (*2 Tim. 3:14–17*) that could threaten the unity of the church.

How can we, as a church, protect ourselves from similar kinds of people who, through false teachings, could bring divisions among us?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “The Rending of the Kingdom,” pp. 87–98, in *Prophets and Kings*; “A Message of Warning and Entreaty,” pp. 298–308, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“The Lord desires His chosen servants to learn how to unite in harmonious effort. It may seem to some that the contrast between their gifts and the gifts of a fellow laborer is too great to allow them to unite in harmonious effort; but when they remember that there are varied minds to be reached, and that some will reject the truth as it is presented by one laborer, only to open their hearts to God’s truth as it is presented in a different manner by another laborer, they will hopefully endeavor to labor together in unity. Their talents, however diverse, may all be under the control of the same Spirit. In every word and act, kindness and love will be revealed; and as each worker fills his appointed place faithfully, the prayer of Christ for the unity of His followers will be answered, and the world will know that these are His disciples.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 483.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 The question of doing what is right in one’s “own eyes” is nothing new. Postmodernism, which challenges the idea of any one central or overarching intellectual or moral authority, could potentially pave the way for the kind of moral anarchy that the Bible warns about. How do we as Christians, and as a church as a whole, confront this kind of challenge?
- 2 Reflect on the story of King Rehoboam and the division of Israel (*1 Kings 12*). What lessons are there for us today?
- 3 What can church leaders and members do to help prevent strife and cliques in a local church? How important is it to stop these issues before they grow and fester? How can we as church members be careful not to fall into the trap that some did in Corinth?
- 4 Study the context of the passage on discord in Proverbs 6:16–19. What do you learn from this to prevent discord in your local church?

Summary: In the Bible we find situations that led to disunity. When God’s people lived in faithful obedience, the dangers of disunity were greatly diminished. Bad decisions made in the time of the judges as well as from the reign of Rehoboam opened the door for division. Even in New Testament times, the potential for disunity remained. A proper understanding of God’s Word and the sanctified effort to obey it are the best protection against disunity and schism among us.

Adventists Sang, Priest Cursed

By ELVIS DUMITRU

I am a pastor because my grandfather, a lifelong Orthodox believer, endorsed the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

As my grandfather was growing old, he spoke to my father in their home in Rătești, a small village in Romania. “If you ever want to belong to the only true Christian church, you have to go to the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” said my grandfather, Gherase Dumitru.

Those words planted a seed that led my father, Aurelian, to seek out the Adventist Church and be baptized in Communist-era Romania. As a result, I grew up in an Adventist home, and my brother and I are both Adventist pastors.

But how did my grandfather know about Adventists?

The story goes back to the early 1960s in Rătești, located about 85 miles (135 kilometers) north of Romania’s capital, Bucharest. Only eight or so Adventists lived in the village, and the authorities ordered their arrest amid a crackdown on religion. A driver was called to transport the Adventists to jail by horse and cart.

As the cart shook and swayed on a bumpy dirt road, the prisoners began to sing hymns in the back. The driver listened, surprised at the beautiful words about Jesus and His love. He thought, *How can these Adventists sing with such joy when they are going to jail?*

About a week later, the driver was called to take the village’s Orthodox priest to his church. The cart struck a pothole en route to the church, and the priest angrily unleashed a torrent of blasphemies.

The driver listened in shock. He thought, *Why is the priest cursing his God for a pothole as he goes to church? And why did those Adventists sing such beautiful songs of praise to Jesus as they went to jail?*

The two incidents left a deep impression on the driver, and he determined to learn more about the Adventists. After a while, he was baptized into the Adventist Church. The driver was a good friend of my grandfather’s.

Rătești remains a small village today but has a strong Adventist presence, with about 40 church members.



We often think that people are not interested in what we are doing, but people are always watching. A cart of Adventist prisoners didn’t know that a driver was listening in awe to their songs of praise—and that their faithfulness would shape two generations of Adventists in my family.

ELVIS DUMITRU, 26, is the associate pastor of the Cuza Voda Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bucharest.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Proverbs 9:10*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Comprehend that God’s Word provides wisdom that, when followed, promotes harmony among God’s people.

Feel: Sense the need for a personal understanding of God’s will as outlined in His Word.

Do: Resolve to follow God’s Word rather than follow personal inclinations of what is right.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Obedience Promotes Unity.

- Ⓐ How does the book of Proverbs define wisdom in chapters 4 and 9?
- Ⓑ The list of blessings in Deuteronomy 28:1–14 does not specifically include unity. What aspects of this passage imply that obedience to God’s Word promotes unity?
- Ⓒ How does following God’s Word result in harmony? How might Paul’s advice to the Corinthians help you to answer this question?

II. Feel: The Need for Understanding God’s Will

- Ⓐ Why did the advice of Rehoboam’s young friends seem right to him?
- Ⓑ Have you ever been so attached to an idea that you have decided it was God’s will for you? What was the outcome of your decision?
- Ⓒ What factors in the church today make a personal understanding of God’s will necessary?

III. Do: Follow God’s Will.

- Ⓐ How can we tell the difference between our own inclinations and God’s will?
- Ⓑ What steps might you take if you are unsure of God’s will?

► **Summary:** The examples of Scripture reveal that faithful obedience to God’s will promotes unity and harmony among God’s people. However, disobedience and the tendency to follow personal inclinations create conditions that foster disunity.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Proverbs 9:10*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The human tendency to do what seems right based on personal judgment frequently leads to problems that create disharmony and disunity. Christians can avoid this pitfall by seeking the wisdom found in God’s Word, particularly focusing on Christ, the center of the gospel.

Just for Teachers: Personal judgment can easily get in the way of doing what is right. As you open the class, help students see how easy it is to create problems by following personal inclinations rather than sound advice.

Opening Discussion: In May 2015, torrential rain led to significant flooding north of Brisbane, Australia. Although emergency services warned drivers not to attempt to drive through flooded waters, many people ignored the warnings. Some individuals based their decisions to drive through high water on the memory that floodwaters had never been too deep on the roads they used regularly. Others argued that they knew the area well enough to cross the flooded road. But perception of risk tends to be poor during emergencies. As a direct result of following their own flawed judgment, five people died when floodwaters swept their cars away. Many other people found themselves needing rescue from the swift currents of the floodwaters.

Discussion Questions: The story we just read provided two reasons for ignoring sound advice. What other reasons might lead someone to ignore sound advice in this kind of situation? How would you categorize reasons that people generally use to ignore what is true?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: The Bible provides a number of examples of people who made wrong choices, but also it provides the basis for better choices. Help your class to recognize the importance of seeking God’s wisdom in their decision-making and the consequences that arise from making the wrong choices.

Bible Commentary

I. Human Judgment of Right and Wrong *(Review Judges 17:6 and 1 Kings 12:1–16.)*

The book of Joshua is filled with celebration and hope as the descendants of Abraham, who had wandered in the desert for 40 years, finally settled in the Promised Land. Filled with the wonder of God's mighty acts, the Israelites vowed to serve God forever, and they renewed their covenant vows. But the mood changes abruptly in the opening pages of the book of Judges. Judges portrays Israel as a nation simply trying to survive as it experienced repeated invasions and even civil war. The spiritual high experienced on arrival in the Promised Land had long since vanished, replaced by spiritual apathy and outright apostasy. While Israel served God under the leadership of Joshua and while those who had observed God's mighty acts had survived, the new generation did not know God or understand what He had done for Israel (*Josh. 24:31, Judg. 2:7–10*). In the absence of this knowledge, they refused to be governed by God's laws, choosing instead to base their choices on what was right in their own judgment. As a consequence, the discipline and cohesion of God's people broke down, and lawlessness and rebellion resulted. The sad story of Judges is a repeated cycle of apostasy, resulting in oppression by the surrounding nations, cries for God's intervention, deliverance by God, and then apostasy once more. It seemed that after God delivered Israel, His role was promptly forgotten, and Israel once again lost sight of His role.

Some one hundred or so years later, King Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, took the throne of the nation. Even though David and Solomon had followed God, the people were still prone to want things their own way. Rehoboam immediately was faced with a decision about whether to continue his father's policies or create his own. During the three days of deliberation that he allocated for making this decision, Rehoboam consulted with his father's counselors and his peers; but he did not consult God at all. His final decision to make life harder for the nation was the final catalyst for a division among God's people.

Consider This: What led Israel to do what was right in their own judgment? How could they have avoided this error? As you reflect on Judges 21:25, do you think that the author of Judges believed that a human king was the solution to Israel's problem? What is the basis of your answer? How does the reign of Rehoboam demonstrate that a human king was not the answer to Israel's problem?

II. The True Source of Wisdom *(Review Psalm 9:10 and James 1:5 with your class.)*

In contrast to the self-centered actions described in Judges and 1 Kings, Scripture suggests that true wisdom comes from another source. Both the book of Proverbs and the book of James clearly identify wisdom with God. Proverbs emphasizes the relational aspect of wisdom, urging its hearers to recognize that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (*Prov. 1:7, NASB, NKJV*). Likewise, Proverbs 9 claims that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (*Prov. 9:10, NASB, NKJV*). Wisdom is here understood as lived and found in one’s encounter with the mighty God. The relationship itself is identified as an indispensable part of wisdom. James, however, emphasizes God as the Giver of wisdom (*James 1:5*). James highlights the generosity and graciousness of God, who willingly gives wisdom to all those who seek it. Here God is the Provider of wisdom to make the decisions required of a lived experience.

Consider This: Do you think there is any conflict between the understanding of wisdom in the book of Proverbs, compared to that outlined in James? Why, or why not? How are both ideas related? Why are both important?

III. Ensuring a Correct Focus (*Review 1 Corinthians 1:10–17 and 2 Timothy 2:14–19.*)

Corinth was a prominent center of commerce, situated on the Isthmus of Greece. Corinth’s proximity to Athens meant that Greco-Roman culture flourished, while its geographical position as a seaport encouraged all sorts of vice. Surprisingly, a church existed here, but letters from Paul and, later, Clement indicate that the church had a great many problems. One of those problems was internal division (*1 Cor. 1:10–17*). Although we find, throughout 1 Corinthians, a number of reasons for division, chapter 1 describes divisions that had arisen due to members focusing on the personalities and teachings of different leaders. The Corinthians had not abandoned their faith, but they were proudly announcing their allegiance to specific Christian leaders. Paul called for a major refocus. The Corinthians should not have been focusing on human leaders but on Jesus Christ, the center of their faith. Christians are not called to follow human leaders, but rather, they are called to follow Jesus, who, Paul points out, is neither proud nor divided. Unity could occur only when Christians focused on the One who had brought them together and torn down the barriers that divided them. It is His death on the cross that is both the power (*1 Cor. 1:18*) and the wisdom of God (*1 Cor. 1:24*), even though the choice of this symbol of shame might have seemed foolish to a Greco-Roman audience.

Consider This: What kind of unity does Paul expect of the Corinthians? Does

he expect them to agree about everything? (*Compare 1 Cor. 1:10 with 1 Cor. 8:7–13.*) How does focusing on Christ bring about the unity Paul describes?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: It is easy to simply agree that God’s wisdom is best, but not allow this knowledge to change the way we approach life. Help your class think carefully about why this resistance to change happens, and then help them focus on the role of a relationship with God in determining God’s will.

Application Questions:

- ❶ Why do human beings find that doing what they want is so appealing? How can seeking God’s will become more appealing?
- ❷ Why do we frequently lose sight of what God has done for us soon after a crisis has passed? How might we prevent this forgetfulness in the future?
- ❸ Does obedience to God’s will always lead to unity? Why not?
- ❹ What can we learn about wisdom by simply being in relationship with God? How does this help us when we are seeking for wisdom in regard to specific issues?
- ❺ How can we continue to focus our attention on Christ in our busy world?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Paul connects Christ with wisdom and calls the Corinthians to focus on what the world sees as folly—Jesus’ death on the cross. Help your class to connect with the practical application of Paul’s solution to the disunity in the church.

Activities:

- ❶ Spend time studying the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians. Then create a Bible study or PowerPoint presentation that outlines Paul’s solution to the problem of disunity.
- ❷ Write a short skit that helps observers to think about what it means to focus on Jesus and His death instead of on the wisdom of the world.