

Unity in Faith



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 4:8–12; Acts 1:11; Matt. 25:1–13; Heb. 9:11, 12; Exod. 20:8–11; 1 Cor. 15:51–54.*

Memory Text: “‘Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.’” (*Acts 4:12, NKJV*).

In 1888 Seventh-day Adventists experienced a period of intense debate over the interpretations of some key Bible texts. While pastors and church leaders were debating the identity of the ten horns of the prophecy of Daniel 7 and of the law in Galatians 3:24, few realized how their hostile attitudes toward each other destroyed their fellowship and friendship and thus marred the unity and mission of the church.

Ellen G. White deeply deplored this state of affairs and encouraged all those involved in these discussions to think carefully about their relationship with Jesus and how love for Jesus ought to be demonstrated in our conduct, especially when we disagree. She also said that we should not expect everyone in the church to agree on every point of interpretation on all Bible texts.

But she also emphasized that we should seek unity of understanding when it comes to essential Adventist beliefs (see Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, pp. 28–32). This week we look at some essential biblical teachings that make us Adventists and that shape our unity in faith.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 24.

Salvation in Jesus

Although as Seventh-day Adventists we have much in common with other Christian bodies, our set of beliefs form a unique system of biblical truth that no one else in the Christian world is proclaiming. These truths help define us as God's end-time remnant.

Read Acts 4:8–12, 10:43. What importance does Peter give to the place of Jesus Christ in his understanding of the plan of salvation?

The apostle Paul told the Corinthians that the good news is “that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19, NKJV). Christ's death is the means of our reconciliation with the Father, bridging the chasm left by sin and death. For centuries, Christians have pondered the meaning of Jesus' death, resurrection, and the reconciliation He came to accomplish. This process of reconciliation has been termed *atonement*, an old English word that originally meant “at-one-ment.” This is a state of being “at one,” or in agreement. Accordingly, atonement denotes harmony in a relationship, and when there has been estrangement, this harmony would be the result of reconciliation. Church unity is thus a gift of this reconciliation.

What do the following passages teach about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection?

Rom. 3:24, 25 _____

1 John 2:2 _____

1 John 4:9, 10 _____

1 Pet. 2:21–24 _____

Though we hold this belief in Christ's death and resurrection in common with many other Christian bodies, we proclaim it in the context of the “everlasting gospel” (Rev. 14:6), part of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6–12. As Seventh-day Adventists, we place an emphasis on these messages that no other Christian body does.

How can you learn to keep before you at all times the reality of Christ's death and resurrection and the hope that it offers?

Second Coming of Christ

The apostles and early Christians considered Christ’s return “the blessed hope” (*Titus 2:13, NKJV*), and they expected all the prophecies and promises of Scripture to be fulfilled at the Second Advent. Seventh-day Adventists still hold firmly to this conviction. In fact, our name, “Adventist,” states it unequivocally. All who love Christ look forward with anticipation to the day they will be able to share face-to-face fellowship with Him. Until that day, the promise of the second coming of Christ exerts a unifying influence on us as God’s people.

What do the following passages teach about the manner of Christ’s return? How does this differ from some of the popular notions of Christ’s return? *Acts 1:11; Matt. 24:26, 27; Rev. 1:7; 1 Thess. 4:13–18; Rev. 19:11–16.*

The Bible repeatedly assures us that Jesus will come again to claim His redeemed people. When this event will happen should not be a matter of speculation, because Jesus Himself stated, “ ‘But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only’ ” (*Matt. 24:36, NKJV*). Not only do we not know when Christ is coming back, we have been told that we do not know.

At the end of His ministry, Jesus told the parable of the ten virgins (*Matt. 25:1–13*) in order to illustrate the experience of the church as it awaits His second coming. The two groups of virgins represent two types of believers who profess to be waiting for Jesus. Superficially, these two groups appear to be alike; but when Jesus’ coming is delayed, the real difference between them becomes obvious. One group, in spite of the delay, had kept its hope alive and had made the adequate spiritual preparation. By this parable Jesus wished to teach His disciples that the Christian experience is to be based not on emotional excitement or enthusiasm but on a continuous reliance on the grace of God and perseverance in faith even when there is no tangible evidence of the fulfillment of God’s promises. Jesus invites us still today to “watch” and be ready at any time for His coming.

Though our very name *Seventh-day Adventist* testifies to how crucial the Second Coming is to us, how can we on a personal level keep the reality of the Second Coming before us? How can we, as the years go by, not make the mistake that Jesus warned about in the parable of the ten virgins?

Jesus' Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary

In the Old Testament, God instructed Moses to build a tabernacle, or sanctuary, to serve as His “dwelling” here on earth (*Exod. 25:8*). Through its services, the sanctuary is where the people of Israel were taught the plan of salvation. Later, in the time of King Solomon, the portable tabernacle was replaced by a magnificent temple (*1 Kings 5–8*). Both the tabernacle and temple were patterned after the heavenly sanctuary, “the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man” (*Heb. 8:2, NKJV; see also Exod. 25:9, 40*).

Throughout the Bible, it is assumed that there is a heavenly sanctuary, serving as the primary dwelling place of God. The earthly sanctuary services were “miniprophecies” of the plan of salvation and of Jesus’ priestly ministry in heaven.

Read Hebrews 8:6; 9:11, 12, 23–28; and 1 John 1:9–2:2. What do these passages teach concerning Jesus’ priestly ministry in heaven?

Since His ascension, the heavenly sanctuary is the place where Christ conducts His priestly ministry for our salvation (*see Heb. 7:25*). Therefore, we are encouraged to “come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (*Heb. 4:16, NKJV*).

As the earthly tabernacle had two phases of priestly ministry—first, on a daily basis in the Holy Place and then once a year in the Most Holy Place—the Scriptures also describe these two phases of Jesus’ ministry in heaven. His ministry in the Holy Place in heaven is characterized by intercession, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration. Repentant sinners have immediate access to the Father through Jesus the Mediator (*1 John 2:1*). Since 1844, Jesus’ ministry in the Most Holy Place deals with the aspects of judgment and cleansing that were done once a year on the Day of Atonement (*Leviticus 16*). The ministry of cleansing the sanctuary also is based on Jesus’ shed blood. The atonement performed on this day foreshadowed the final application of the merits of Christ to remove the presence of sin and to accomplish the complete reconciliation of the universe into one harmonious government under God. The doctrine of this two-phase ministry is a unique Adventist contribution to the understanding of the entire plan of salvation.

The Sabbath

Another crucial biblical teaching that Seventh-day Adventists believe and uphold is the seventh-day Sabbath. This is a key doctrine that brings unity and fellowship among us. It is one that, with very few exceptions in Christendom, we alone follow.

The Sabbath is God's gift to humanity right from the Creation week itself (*Gen. 2:1–3*). At Creation, three distinctive divine acts established the Sabbath: (1) God rested on the Sabbath, (2) He blessed the day, and (3) He sanctified it. These three actions instituted the Sabbath as God's special gift, enabling the human race to experience the reality of heaven on earth and to affirm God's six-day Creation. A well-known rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, has called the Sabbath "a palace in time," a holy day when God meets with His people in a special way.

What do the following passages teach about the meaning of the Sabbath for humankind? *Exod. 20:8–11; Deut. 5:12–15; Ezek. 20:12, 20.*

In our desire to follow Jesus' example (*Luke 4:16*), Seventh-day Adventists observe the seventh-day Sabbath. Jesus' participation in Sabbath services reveals that He endorsed it as a day of rest and worship. Some of His miracles were done on the Sabbath in order to teach the dimension of healing (both physical and spiritual) that comes from the celebration of the Sabbath (*see Luke 13:10–17*). The apostles and early Christians understood that Jesus had not abolished the Sabbath; they themselves kept it as well and attended worship on that day (*Acts 13:14, 42, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4*).

Another beautiful dimension of the Sabbath is its sign of our deliverance from sin. The Sabbath is the memorial of God's salvation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt to the rest He promised in the land of Canaan (*Deut. 5:12–15*). Despite the failure of Israel to enter fully into this rest because of their repeated disobedience and idolatry, God still promises that "there remains therefore a rest for the people of God" (*Heb. 4:9, NKJV*). All who desire to enter into that rest can enter it by faith in the salvation Jesus provides. The observance of the Sabbath symbolizes this spiritual rest in Christ and that we rely only on His merits, and not works, to save us from sin and to give us eternal life. (*See Heb. 4:10, Matt. 11:28–30.*)

In what very tangible ways has the Sabbath helped you experience the unity and fellowship that Christ desires for His people?

Death and Resurrection

At Creation, “God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (*Gen. 2:7, NKJV*). This account of the creation of humanity reveals that life derives from God. Is immortality an intrinsic aspect of this life? The Bible tells us that only God is immortal (*1 Tim. 6:16*); immortality is not given to humans at birth. In contrast to God, human beings are mortal. Scripture compares our lives with “a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away” (*James 4:14, NKJV*), and at death our lives enter a sleeplike state in which there is no consciousness. (See *Eccl. 9:5, 6, 10; Ps. 146:4; Ps. 115:17; John 11:11–15*.)

Although people are born mortal and subject to death, the Bible speaks of Jesus Christ as the source of immortality and tells us that He gives the promise of immortality and eternal life to all those who believe in His salvation. “The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Rom. 6:23, NKJV*). Jesus “has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (*2 Tim. 1:10, NKJV*). “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (*John 3:16, NKJV*). So, there is hope of life after death.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:51–54 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. What do these passages tell us about life after death and when immortality will be given to human beings?

The apostle Paul makes it clear that God bestows immortality upon people, not at the moment of death, but rather at the resurrection, when the last trumpet will sound. While believers receive the promise of eternal life at the moment they accept Jesus as their Savior, immortality is given only at the resurrection. The New Testament knows nothing of the idea of souls going off to heaven immediately at death; this teaching has its roots in paganism, going back to the philosophy of the ancient Greeks, and is not found in either the Old or New Testament.

How does our understanding of death help us appreciate even more the promise of the Second Coming? How does this belief powerfully unite us as Seventh-day Adventists?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “The Foundations, Pillars, and Landmarks,” pp. 28–32, in *Counsels to Writers and Editors*. Read the article “Doctrines, Importance of,” pp. 778, 779, in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*.

As Seventh-day Adventists we do share important beliefs in common with some other Christian bodies. The central one, of course, is belief in salvation by faith alone through the atoning and substitutionary death of Jesus. We, along with other Christians, believe that our righteousness is found, not in our own works, but in Christ’s righteousness, which is credited to us by faith, an unmerited gift of grace. Or, as Ellen G. White famously wrote: “Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 25. At the same time, taken as a whole, our set of fundamental beliefs, and the practices and lifestyle that emerge from those beliefs, make us unique among the Christian world. That’s the way it should be, too; if not, why even exist, at least as Seventh-day Adventists? Our love of Jesus and the teachings we proclaim should be the most powerful uniting factors among us.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In *Faith and Works*, p. 103, Ellen G. White equates justification with forgiveness of sins. How is an appreciation of our forgiveness and justification in Christ a basis for our fellowship and community with brothers and sisters?
- 2 Think about how important our doctrines are in the context of church unity. That is, what has brought together millions of people from so many diverse ethnic, religious, political, and cultural backgrounds other than our shared doctrinal beliefs? What does this tell us about how important doctrine is, not just in the context of mission and message but for church unity, as well?
- 3 Our very name, *Seventh-day Adventists*, points to two crucial teachings, the seventh-day Sabbath and the Second Advent. One part of our name points to Creation, the other redemption. How are these two teachings related, and in what ways do they together so succinctly capture the essence of who we are as a people?

Summary: Seventh-day Adventists hold in common many fundamental beliefs. Some we hold in common with other Christians; others not. Taken as a whole, these teachings form our identity as a distinct church and are the foundation of our unity in Jesus.

Punished for Others' Sins

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

When people first met the young boy, their first question was not “What’s your name?” but “What’s wrong with your legs?”

Jack Chen crawled along the ground in his rural home in central Taiwan until he was five. Through daily physical exercises, he managed to build enough muscle to stand upright when he entered first grade. But he walked awkwardly on the balls of his feet, prompting teasing and taunts of “Freak!” from the other children. Sometimes, the boys spat on him as they passed by.

Chen was born with a leg disease that puzzled doctors. But Chen and his parents had no doubt about the cause: Someone had done something wrong in the family, and now they were being punished.

“My family worships idols, and my parents believed that we were being punished for something that they or our ancestors had done,” Chen said.

When Chen was 12, a family friend suggested that Chen, who was lagging in public school, might have a better chance studying at a nearby Seventh-day Adventist school.

Chen heard about Jesus for the first time when he enrolled in the seventh grade. He read the Bible for the first time. He decided at the age of 13 to give his heart to Jesus.

The answer to his biggest question—why he was being punished for other people’s sins—came about a year later when he read of Jesus healing a man blind from birth. He read, “And His disciples asked Him, saying, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.’ ” (John 9:2, 3; NKJV).

Chen felt a heavy burden being lifted as he read those words. “I realized that this was not a punishment but a blessing,” he said. “If I didn’t have this disease, my family and I never would have had a chance to know God.”

Chen went on to graduate from Taiwan Adventist College and now serves as a pastor in the coastal town of Jiading. He walks with a slight limp in one leg but otherwise functions normally. He is married and has two young sons.



JACK CHEN, 32, pictured left, marvels at how he found Jesus—or how Jesus found him. “I wasn’t even a Christian, but I was looking for God, for someone who could save my life,” he said. “You have to open your mind first to look for God, and then God will tell you what to do next.”

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Hebrews 9:11, 12*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Review the contribution of core Adventist doctrines to Adventist identity and unity in Christ.

Feel: Value the unifying nature of biblical truth.

Do: Allow the Holy Spirit to internalize truth so that it impacts daily living.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Identity, Truth, and Unity

A How do the essential elements of the gospel contribute to the concept of church unity?

B What doctrines form the core of Adventist belief? What led you to choose those particular doctrines?

C Consider each of the doctrines you believe is core to Adventist identity. How might they have a unifying effect on the church?

II. Feel: Advantages of a Common Message

A Why do you think God revealed specific information about topics other than Himself in Scripture?

B What value is there in having a group of people who agree biblically about what they consider are important doctrines?

III. Do: Internalizing Truth

A Why is it essential that truth is internalized fully?

B How can we internalize truth so that it impacts the way we live?

C What steps do you need to make for this to be a reality in your life?

► **Summary:** Seventh-day Adventist Christians recognize the central role of the death and resurrection of Christ in salvation and Christian unity. They also understand that God has revealed information in Scripture that is critical in determining how we relate to God and to other human beings. These doctrines define both our identity and our mission.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Acts 4:10–12*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Christian beliefs are not arbitrary propositions to which a Christian must consent. Instead, they are guidelines for living that impact the relationships between the Christian, God, and other people. Consequently, our beliefs shape our unity in the faith.

Just for Teachers: Scripture does not equate unity with uniformity. It does suggest, however, that Christians should hold some core beliefs in common and implies that the unity that develops sends an important message to the world. The opening discussion is designed to help the class recognize that sometimes a group can accomplish more than one individual.

Opening Discussion: Many sporting events involve the audience to create effects that one person alone could not create. For instance, during the opening of the Vancouver Olympic Games in 2010, a single light was lit in the middle of the stadium, which was followed by a growing sea of lights on the field. Once the light reached the edges of the field, audience members had been instructed to turn on their torches row by row, creating the effect of an ever-growing circle of light. At other events, audience members have been given large square cards with various colors on them. They are instructed to raise the squares high above their heads at a particular moment during the program. Together the squares form a message or symbol that millions of viewers can see across the world.

Working together, the audience was able to accomplish something that a single person working alone could not do. God has called the church to work together to send a message more powerful than the message that we could convey by ourselves. As we unite in the truth as it is in Jesus and focus on the mission of the church, we demonstrate in a memorable way the transforming power of the gospel to the world.

Discussion Questions: Have you ever worked together with others to accomplish something that you could not do alone? What was accomplished? What did it feel like to work with the team? What attitudes were key to the completion of your task?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: This section seeks to make connections between doctrines and their implications for unity within the church by exploring how the doctrines impact relationships and identity.

Bible Commentary

I. Unity and the Gospel *(Review Acts 4:8–12 with your class.)*

The central doctrines of Christianity relate to Jesus. His incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ministry in the heavenly sanctuary testify to God’s desire to be in relationship with His creation. Jesus became the Reconciler who made this relationship possible, dying on the cross to deal with the consequences of humankind’s sinful choices. But the consequences of His death extend beyond reconciliation with God. As we are united with Christ in baptism, we also are united with one another. Thus, Paul can claim that Jesus’ death also tore down barriers between people (*Eph. 2:14*). Further, as we experience God’s reconciliation, we are called to be reconciled with one another. Church unity is possible only because of Jesus’ death.

Consider This: In what ways has the death of Jesus broken barriers between people? How does being united in Christ impact your relationship with other church members?

II. Unity and Truth *(Review Matthew 25:1–13 with your class.)*

Scripture calls for the church to be united, while at the same time, to hold fast to truth. This poses a dilemma. Truth is, by nature, exclusive. Pursuing truth involves rejection of error and is associated with the concept of purity. Thus, truth can be seen as selective and exclusive. On the other hand, unity is, by nature, inclusive. Consequently, discussions about unity often emphasize unity at the expense of truth or emphasize truth at the expense of unity. How, then, do we resolve this tension and pursue both truth and unity? Part of the solution can be found by examining what the Bible says about truth.

The New Testament provides important information about both the nature and role of truth. It identifies Jesus as “the truth,” as we noted above (*John 14:6; 18:32, 37*), but also recognizes God’s Word (*John 17:17*), the law (*Rom. 2:20*), the gospel (*Eph. 1:13*), the apostles’ teaching (*2 Thess. 2:13–15*), and sound doctrine as truth (*2 Tim. 4:2–4*). Truth, however, is not simply something to which we give intel-

lectual assent. It must be internalized, leading to a change in our behavior. It is no use knowing that Jesus is coming soon if that knowledge doesn't change the way we live or cause us to prepare for His coming. Likewise, John suggests that if our lives don't radiate love to others, we demonstrate that we don't know the truth (*1 John 2, 3*). If truth remains external and intellectual, there will always be a clash between truth and unity. But when, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, truth is internalized, truth impacts our relationship with God and those around us and thus facilitates the church in its quest for unity.

Consider This: How does the parable of the ten virgins illustrate the need to internalize truth? How is truth internalized? Why is it easier to allow truth to remain external to us? In what specific ways do the doctrines studied in this week's lesson impact your relationships with God and others?

III. Unity and Adventist Doctrines (*Review Exodus 20:8–11 and 1 Corinthians 15:51–54 with your class.*)

Truth not only impacts unity through internal transformation. It also produces a common identity and witness. Our identity is first and foremost in Christ and what He has done for us, but we also have core beliefs that constitute our common identity as Seventh-day Adventist Christians. This core includes beliefs that the pioneers of the church believed had been revealed to them in Scripture by the Spirit's leading. They are beliefs that have the potential to unite us in our understanding of God and ourselves. In acknowledging, for example, the seventh-day Sabbath, we are united in our recognition that God is in control of the universe and, with it, time. We are reminded that we are mere creatures dependent upon Him. As the Sabbath also is a memorial to Redemption, we also are united in acknowledging and remembering that salvation is not our work but that of Christ. Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary unites us in recognizing our ongoing need for God's mercy and grace while also providing confidence that we can come before the presence of God. Our understanding of the state of the dead unites us in recognizing our finiteness and dependence upon God for every breath of life, while our understanding of the Resurrection and the Second Coming unites us in hope as we wait to spend eternity with the God of love and grace. Together these doctrines not only contribute to our identity as Seventh-day Adventists, but they also remind us of our identity as sinful humans with a common need and hope in Christ.

Consider This: Why is a common identity important? How does this impact the mission of the church? How does the identity provided by these doctrines

prevent arrogance or exclusivity? In what other ways do the doctrines studied this week unite us in our understanding of God and ourselves?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Truth and doctrine are often seen as abstract propositions that make any discussion of truth and unity seem more philosophical than practical. But doctrines are neither abstract nor arbitrary. They are designed to impact our relationships with God and with others around us. Highlight the practical nature of doctrine and what lived truth might look like in the life of a Christian.

Application Questions:

- ❶ If our source of unity is our shared life in Jesus, why does what we believe make a difference to the unity we display to the world?
- ❷ What might Christ-centered unity imply about the ways in which we treat those who disagree with us theologically?
- ❸ How can the fact that Jesus is the Truth make a difference to the way we understand truth and unity?
- ❹ What does living the truth as it is in Jesus mean? How does it impact unity? Choose one doctrine and consider what living that truth in Jesus might look like.
- ❺ Which doctrine of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has most helped to unite you with other believers? How has it done so?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Many believers think about doctrine only when they are studying for baptism or when they attend a mission program run by their local church. Help members see the importance of considering doctrine more carefully as they contemplate living truth as it is in Jesus and fulfilling their commission to demonstrate unity to the world.

Activities: Bring a list of the 28 fundamental beliefs to class. Create a plan to study each doctrine more carefully, including taking the time to examine what the doctrine reveals about God, how the doctrine might be lived in everyday life, and how the doctrine contributes to the unity of the church.