

Keys to Family Unity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Gen. 33:12–14, Ruth 1:16–18, John 17:21–26, Gal. 3:28, Eph. 2:11–22, 5:21–6:9.*

Memory Text: “That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (*John 17:21, NKJV*).

Family life represents different seasons of life for different people. For the mother and father, the introduction of children in their lives represents a major change, one that will last their lifetimes. And for the offspring, of course, going from nonexistence to existence is, indeed, a major transition. Then, too, children go through the various stages of life until they leave home and, indeed, might have children of their own.

Yet, whether as parents or children in a family, we all struggle with the same thing, and this is our sinful fallen natures, which can make unity in family life very challenging, to say the least.

Yes, in the body of Jesus Christ on the cross all humanity has been reconciled to God and to one another (*Eph. 2:13–16, Col. 1:21–23*), but on a daily practical level we must appropriate for ourselves the grace of Christ, which alone can make family unity a living experience for all who seek it in faith. This must be a daily experience in our lives. Fortunately, through the grace of Christ, it can be.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 18.

Christ the Center

What illustration does Paul use to describe the new unity that exists between peoples in Christ? How has Christ made “one” out of “two”? *Eph. 2:11–22; see also Gal. 3:28.*

The cross of Christ removes the barriers that separate people from each other. Walls separated worshipers in the Jewish temple, men from women, and Jews from Gentiles. Describing the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, Paul used language that applies equally to other divisions between nations, people groups, social strata, and gender. “To create out of the two a single new humanity in himself, thereby making peace” (*Eph. 2:15, NEB*) is good news that helps couples to truly know “one flesh” unity in marriage. Also, by faith in Christ, long-divided families can be reconciled.

It’s one thing to quote Bible texts about oneness in Christ; it’s wholly another to actually experience it. What practical changes does Christ bring to our lives that enable us to experience the oneness and unity we have been promised? *See, for instance, Rom. 6:4–7, 2 Cor. 5:17, Eph. 4:24–32.*

“Picture a large circle, from the edge of which are many lines all running to the center. The nearer these lines approach the center, the nearer they are to one another. . . .

“The closer we come to Christ, the nearer we shall be to one another.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 179.

“Between father and son, husband and wife, . . . stands Christ the Mediator, whether they are able to recognize him or not. We cannot establish direct contact outside ourselves except through him, through his word, and through our following of him.”—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The MacMillan Publishing Co., 1979), p. 108.

How close is your family, or church family, to the center of that circle? What else must come down in order for the relationships to be as they ought to be?

Becoming One Through His Love

“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else” (1 Thess. 3:12, NIV).

Jesus prayed to His Father that His followers would “‘be one as we are one’ ” (John 17:22, NIV). Summarize what Jesus was saying here, focusing specifically on the role of love needed in order to achieve this oneness.

Unity among His followers was on Jesus’ mind in this prayer. Experiencing agape love is essential to this unity. *Agape* is the Bible word for God’s love used in this prayer and in many other places in the New Testament. Such love is God’s very nature (1 John 4:8), and it identifies Jesus’ followers (John 13:35). God’s love is not natural to the sinful human heart. It comes into one’s life as Jesus dwells with the believer by His Spirit (Rom. 5:5; 8:9, 11).

“‘Love each other as I have loved you’ ” (John 15:12, NIV). The disciple John, who wrote these words, was once not lovable but proud, power-hungry, critical, and hot-tempered (Mark 3:17; Luke 9:54, 55; see also *The Desire of Ages*, p. 295). Later in life he remembered how Jesus had kept on loving him in spite of these traits. Jesus’ love gradually changed John, enabling him to love others in Christian unity. “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19, NKJV), he wrote, and “if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11, NKJV).

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4–8. Try placing your name where the word “love” appears. How well does it fit? Ask Jesus to bring these qualities of love into your life by His Spirit. What changes might the Spirit prompt you to make in order to reach this Christian ideal?

Selfishness: Family Destroyer

“If pride and selfishness were laid aside, five minutes would remove most difficulties.”—Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, p. 119.

As human beings, our natures have been corrupted by sin. And, perhaps, the greatest example of that corruption is the curse of selfishness. We seem to be born selfish; we can see this reality in small children, whose basic nature is want for themselves. “Me, me, me . . .” By the time we reach adulthood, this trait can manifest itself in some pretty terrible ways, especially in the home.

Of course, Jesus came to change this (*Eph. 4:24*). His Word promises us that we, through Him, don’t have to be dominated by this destructive character trait. His whole life is a perfect example of what it means to live without selfishness; to the degree we emulate His life (*1 John 2:6*), we will overcome the tendency to live only for ourselves.

Look up the following texts. What do they tell us about living a life of selflessness?

Phil. 2:3–5 _____

1 John 3:16–18 _____

As Ellen G. White wrote above, if pride and selfishness were put aside, so many problems could be solved very quickly, long before they fester and brew and eventually turn into something nasty. All members of the family, especially the parents, must be purged (*Prov. 16:6*) of this sin at the foot of the Cross (the greatest example in all the universe of selflessness), even if that means constantly coming back to the Cross and kneeling in prayer, faith, tears, and submission.

How much time are you spending at the Cross fighting against whatever selfishness appears in your life? How does this verse (*Matt. 7:16*) help show you if you’ve been spending enough time there?

Submission

What counsel does Paul have regarding humility and service in relationships? *Eph. 5:21*. **How** do you think this attitude contributes to unity in the church? **Why** is it so important at home? *Eph. 5:22–6:9*.

The word *submit* (*Eph. 5:21*) means to place oneself humbly before another person on the basis of voluntary choice. This unique principle began with Christ (*Matt. 20:26–28; John 13:4, 5; Phil. 2:5–8*) and characterizes all those who are filled with His Spirit (*Eph. 5:18*). “Reverence for Christ” is what motivates people to submit in this way (*Eph. 5:21, NIV*). Mutuality in self-giving was, and still is, a revolutionary Christian teaching about social relationships. It brings to life the spiritual reality that all are one in Christ, there are no exceptions.

A household principle. The proving ground of Christian submission is in the home. If this principle is effective there, it will make a dramatic difference in the church. Paul moves immediately from the introduction of the principle of submission to discuss its application in families.

Three pairs of relationships are addressed in Ephesians 5:22–6:9—the most common yet most unequal relationships in society. The intent is not to reinforce an existing social order but to show how the faith culture of Christ operates when there is a radically different voluntary submission of believers to one another.

Why do you think Paul consistently speaks first to those who are socially weaker in the culture—the wives, children, and slaves? **Write** the qualifying phrase attached to the submission of each of these.

<i>Eph. 5:22</i>	<i>Eph. 6:1</i>	<i>Eph. 6:5</i>

Those with greater social power—husbands, parents, masters—are always addressed second. Each receives a directive quite uncommon to the culture. These directives must have astonished the believers of the first century. They leveled the ground around the Cross and opened the way for true oneness to be experienced in relationships.

Living the Love We Promise

Ultimately, family cohesion and unity rest on the commitment of family members, beginning with the commitment of the marital partners, to care for one another. Sadly, Bible history is strewn with examples of failed promises, broken trust, and lack of commitment where it should have been present. Scripture also has stirring examples of ordinary people who, with God’s help, committed themselves to friends and families and kept their promises.

Look at the following families and their levels of commitment. How could commitment have been strengthened in some families? What encouraged the commitment shown in the others?

Parent-child commitment (*Gen. 33:12–14, Exod. 2:1–10*) _____

Sibling commitment (*Gen. 37:17–28*) _____

Family commitment (*Ruth 1:16–18; 2:11, 12, 20; 3:9–13; 4:10, 13*) _____

Marital commitment (*Hos. 1:2, 3, 6, 8; 3:1–3*) _____

When we commit ourselves to another person, as in marriage or in the decision to bear or adopt a child, there is a willing surrender of our freedom to make a different choice in the future, a surrender of control over an important segment of our lives. Laws may restrain negative behavior, but marriage and family relationships need love within them to enable them to flourish.

What does Jesus’ promise of commitment (*Heb. 13:5*) mean to you personally? What effect should His commitment to you have on your commitment to Him, to your spouse, to your children, and to fellow believers?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “A Sacred Circle,” pp. 177–180, in *The Adventist Home*; “Unity in Our Work,” pp. 236–238, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6.

Results of Family Unity. “The first work of Christians is to be united in the family. . . .

“The more closely the members of a family are united in their work in the home, the more uplifting and helpful will be the influence that father and mother and sons and daughters will exert outside the home.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 37.

The Secret of Family Unity. “The cause of division and discord in families and in the church is separation from Christ. To come near to Christ is to come near to one another. The secret of true unity in the church and in the family is not diplomacy, not management, not a superhuman effort to overcome difficulties—though there will be much of this to do—but union with Christ.”—Page 179.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Talk about the forces in your own society that work against family unity. What practical solutions can you offer to a family that is struggling against these influences?
- 2 Is there a family in your church right now that has come apart? If so, what can you do as a class to help each member in this crisis time?
- 3 Discuss this whole question of submission. How is it to be understood in a Christian context? In what ways has the principle been abused?
- 4 What principles can you see in regard to family unity that can be applied to the idea of unity in the church, as well?

“The Man” Shares Sabbath

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Not many people can say that they have spoken with an angel.

Farmer Notley Tidwell could—but he didn’t. Instead, he referred to the mysterious stranger as “the man.”

One evening in the 1880s, Tidwell prayed as he trudged home, his fiddle in hand, from a barn dance in the U.S. state of Texas. He was confused. He had been raised to worship on Sunday, but he had been studying the Bible and saw that the fourth commandment said, “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy” (*Exod. 20:8*).

As he prayed, a man suddenly appeared beside him. Tidwell knew everyone in the area, and he had never seen this man before. But he wasn’t startled. The stranger was very pleasant.

“He just appeared and started talking to him,” said his granddaughter, Lorena Stigaulde, 94.

The conversation soon turned to the Sabbath, and Tidwell shared his growing conviction that God had set aside Saturday, not Sunday. He expressed bewilderment that he couldn’t find anyone who observed Saturday.

The stranger said he knew of a group of people who worshipped on Saturday, and he gave directions to their meeting place. Tidwell glanced to the side as they spoke, and when he looked back, the man was gone.

“He was just there, and he turned, and he was gone,” said his great-granddaughter Reba Seifert, 68.

Returning home, Tidwell told his wife about the unusual meeting and, days later, decided to follow the man’s directions. They led to a farmhouse where a small group of Seventh-day Adventists met every Sabbath.

Tidwell was baptized into the Adventist Church with his wife and their eight children. He later became a local church leader and planted the first local Adventist church, located between the towns of Linden and Marietta, Texas.

Although the church is now closed, others have sprung up in the area, including a church in Linden where Stigaulde attends with other relatives.

Tidwell’s legacy also lives on. His faithfulness to God spawned several generations of mission-minded Seventh-day Adventists who have served as Bible workers, literature evangelists, and special needs leaders in Texas and beyond.

“He became the first Adventist in a large family,” said Seifert, one of granddaughter Stigaulde’s four children.



Tidwell never identified the stranger as an angel, but the family believes that he was sent from heaven in answer to an earnest prayer.

“He just called him ‘the man,’ but he believed that God sent him,” said Stigaulde, who heard her grandfather tell the story when she was a girl. “I believe he was an angel.”

Part I: Overview

Jesus desires us to be in unity with one another. Many reasons could be offered to explain why Jesus wants us to be in unity. But Christ mentioned one reason that shoots the importance of unity to the top of the list. This week's memory text brings out that we are all to be one in the Father and Son, "so that the world may believe that you [Father] have sent me [Jesus]" (*John 17:21, ESV*). So, the world's belief in who Jesus really is, and where He is from, hinges, in some respects, on the unity of believers.

So, how are we doing? The burden of Christian unity on a global scale is overwhelming. But unity at the family level is realistic. The onus for such unity, therefore, lies squarely on our shoulders.

The burden, though, was first on Christ's shoulders. His triumph over evil (*1 John 3:8*), the reconciling nature of the cross (*Eph. 2:13–16, Col. 1:21–23*), and the availability of the Spirit (*Acts 2, 1 Cor. 12:13*) pave the way for unity among His people. Couple these events with Christ's new commandment to love *as He loved* (*John 13:34*), dying to self and selfishness (*Rom. 6:3–7*), along with submitting to one another (*Eph. 5:21*), and the family becomes empowered to mirror the oneness for which Jesus prayed (*John 17*).

Part II: Commentary

Devotional on Unity

True unity is a beautiful thing to behold. The recipe is simple: otherness and submission. Of course, one could say "No, you need love" or "You need the Holy Spirit." True enough. But there is something about the word *submission* that hones all the other necessary ingredients to a sharp edge. We get away too easily with volleying the word *love* back and forth within our families and then wonder why this love is unable to produce the warm unity for which we hoped. Perhaps if the quantity of spoken "I love you's" were matched by genuine acts of submission, things would be different.

Either submission exists as an ethos within the family or it doesn't exist at all. If there is a single family member whose will demands, but never participates in, submission, their familial situation may be called many things, but it can't be called unity.

The paragon of submission is the life of Jesus. The apex of that submission is heard in Gethsemane: "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (*Luke 22:42*). Here is one of the keys to the profound unity between the Father and the

Son. Jesus explained that the Father had not left Him alone, and was with Him because He (Jesus) did “always those things that please him” (*John 8:29*). It is telling that Jesus Himself did not shun submission. This point is crucial because of late the term *submission* has been entangled in ecclesiastical controversies concerning ordination, gender roles, and headship. Regardless of those important concerns, the fact that the King of kings lived a life of submission elevates personal acts of submission across the board with those serious about Christlikeness. And if there is one institution that requires unity through submission more than another, it’s marriage.

Illustration

Couples can have breakthroughs in a moment that can change the course of their marriages. Joseph married a woman whose family dynamics dictated that disagreements were opportunities for “lively” discussions aimed at producing one winner and one loser. When the game rules are such, a posture of defense and attack becomes the norm. The “olive wreath” is awarded to one who outwits, belittles, or verbally shocks his or her opponent. No submission is allowed, no unity is achieved, and relationships become stunted.

Neither Joseph nor his wife wanted this outcome. But he wrestled with how best to communicate to his wife that the contexts for their disagreements could be radically changed to something more constructive. Joseph needed to convince his wife that they did not have to be two separate individuals locked in a contest for superiority and that it was in *his best interests* never to leverage her vulnerability, mistakes, or weaknesses against her in order to “win” an argument. Finally, Joseph decided to use what the late, great marriage counselor Gary Smalley called an “emotional word picture” (a parable intended to communicate insight and emotion from one person to another).

Around this time, Joseph and his wife were backpacking in the Sierra Nevadas. As they sat beside a cool creek with stunning mountains in the background, these mountains suddenly became the source of Joseph’s parable. He said to his wife, “Every time we have a conflict, picture ourselves on the summit of one of these mountains. Now, many couples think they are playing King of the Mountain during a relational conflict. The ‘winner’ is the one who is able to verbally dominate the other to the point of pushing him or her off the cliff. But this victory is an artificial win. I will never play this way with you, not because I’m a nice guy but because marriage has tied our ankles together with a long and sturdy rope—if you go over, I go over. It is true, there are two of us, but there is only one marriage, one relationship. It will be in both our best interests if we do, say, and think only those things that will benefit this third entity between

us now called *marriage*. There are no winners *and* losers—we either both win or we both lose.” This philosophy has been a key to the unity within Joseph’s marriage and family.

Basically, marriage is a unique experiment to see if two potentially radically different people can operate as one. Mike Mason presents the struggle this way: “Even the closest of couples will inevitably find themselves engaged in a struggle of wills, for marriage is a wild, audacious attempt at an almost impossible degree of cooperation between two powerful centers of self-assertion. Marriage cannot help being a furnace of conflict, a crucible in which these two wills must be melted down and purified and made to conform.”—*The Mystery of Marriage* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Press, 1985), p. 167. In his brilliant chapter entitled “Submission,” Mason puts his finger on how this can happen. It sounds a bit like the rope parable. “ ‘He who is least among you,’ says Jesus, ‘he is the greatest’ (Luke 9:48). . . . Marriage at its best is a sort of contest in what might be called ‘one-downmanship,’ a backwards tug of war between two wills each equally determined not to win. That is really the only attitude which works in marriage because that is the way the Lord designed it.”—Page 167.

Scripture

“Wives, submit to your own husbands. . . . Children, obey your parents. . . . Bondservants, obey your earthly masters” (*Eph. 5:22, 6:1, 6:5, ESV*). When Scripture is abused, sooner or later people are too. One can only imagine the frequency these three texts have been invoked to carry out the opposite of the Spirit’s intentions. Ironically, being filled with the Spirit versus being drunk on alcohol is the broader context of these passages (*Eph. 5:18*). Alcohol makes a poor interpreter. It’s the socially weaker counterpart that often feels the slap of its influence. At times, culture progresses in such a way that it becomes just as important to say what texts don’t mean than to say what they do mean. Perhaps that is the case here.

Paul’s list and attendant comments on these social doublets contrast with nonbiblical lists of his day that encouraged harsh treatments to protect the honor of husband, parent, and slave owner.—See Jon Dybdahl, ed., *Andrews Study Bible* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2010), p. 1549. Paul has something different in mind. Though much could be said (and should be said) on the slave/master portion of Paul’s thoughts, this quarter’s theme on family narrows our focus.

In terms of this week’s lesson on family unity, themes such as submission, love, and Christ’s relationship to His church can all be found here in Ephesians 5. Indeed, they must be found together. Otherwise, interpreters

may come to such conclusions as it is only for wives to submit and husbands to be submitted to. True, the word *submit* is not directly applied to husbands, but the fact that the previous text of “submitting to one another” (*Eph. 5:21*) is a generalized result of being filled with the Spirit (*Eph. 5:18*), makes it highly unlikely that Paul was exclusively thinking of wives when he wrote Ephesians 5:21, unless one ventures to say only wives are filled with the Holy Spirit (a conclusion the most patriarchal of interpreters may find hard to swallow). Paul certainly doesn’t think wives shouldn’t submit to their husbands. But he sees such submission as paralleling the relationship between Christ and His people (*Eph. 5:22–24*). However, the parallel is valid only as husbands are living metaphors of the love of Christ (*Eph. 5:25*). Christ’s voluntary death for the saving of His bride is the greatest act of submission the universe has ever known. It may be that Paul’s phrase “submitting yourselves one to another” applies to marriage in that the husband’s submission is subsumed under the imperative to love as Christ loves.

Part III: Life Application

Modern-day idolatry is expressed through self-worship in which absolute autonomy is the prized ethic: my importance, my desires, my preferences, my ambitions, and my way of folding clothes or doing dishes are all non-negotiables. “As long as I’m not hurting anyone else,” this ethic exclaims, “I can do what I want.” And, of course, one can *do* what he or she wants; but one can’t just *get* what one wants if Christian maturity, loving relationships, and family unity are anywhere on the horizons. Now let the class take the profound but abstract themes of the lesson and share what these ideas look like when translated into actions.

- 1. How could a husband or wife, who feels the marriage relationship unfairly favors only his or her spouse’s desires, start a conversation as a way of taking steps toward unity? Be specific.**

- 2. What family strategies could help estranged children feel that their opinions and desires are of value within the family without inverting the parent/child authority paradigm?**

- 3. Submission, love, and commitment need to be expressed, not just in words but in hundreds of little actions each day within families. What are some of these actions that you use to keep your family unified?**
