

Brothers *and* Sisters *in the* Faith



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 26:21-25; John 10:16; 17:11; Rom. 12:4, 5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 4:3, 13; Phil. 2:2.*

Memory Text: “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (*Galatians 6:10, NIV*).

As Seventh-day Adventists, we often refer to one another as “brother” and “sister.” When overused, however, such terminology can, of course, easily become an empty phrase; and if used without care, it can, at times, create an awkwardness when nonmembers are around. Nonetheless, the idea that we are “brothers” and “sisters” in faith is something we should not lose, even if, at times, like all families, our relationship with our “brothers” and “sisters” faces hard challenges. Some of our spiritual siblings have traits we do not admire, and not every “brother” and “sister” always acts brotherly and sisterly toward each other. This is a fact of church life; we might as well get used to it.

Thus, as most of us who are church members could understand, there is ample reason to devote a week on the topic of our relationships with fellow believers, especially those who can try our patience and mercy to their limits.

The Week at a Glance: How did Paul describe the diversity amid the unity of the church? Around what should our core unity rest? What things may cause disunity among us? How was Christ's treatment of Judas an example in how we should respond to those among us who treat us badly?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 11.*

One in Christ *(Rom. 12:4, 5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27).*

One of the greatest challenges facing our church is the question of unity. The church started as a movement among North Americans with a predominantly Protestant background. It then moved into Europe and gradually also into other parts of the world, encountering more and more different belief systems and cultures. Today the church has a presence in more than two hundred countries and is growing fast, particularly in the non-Western world. It is not hard to see how there is a continuous danger of growing apart or even fragmenting, unless we are determined to stay together. A sustained focus on unity is, therefore, needed more than ever as we face the challenges ahead. After all, how can we light the world with the glory of the three angels' messages if we are busy fighting among ourselves?

What is one of the favorite images of the apostle Paul to describe the nature of Christ's church? How does this image underline the essential aspect of unity? *Rom. 12:4, 5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27.*

"Paul . . . makes a very effective parallel with the church collectively being compared to the parts of the human body. The comparison was not original with Paul. Many ancient writers had made a similar point. . . . The Corinthians would therefore readily understand Paul's words, 'If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body' (*1 Cor. 12:15, NIV*). . . .

"The very weakest members . . . are indispensable; and, furthermore, the parts that we think are less honorable, we treat with special honor. For example, the vital organs (such as the heart, the kidneys, the lungs, the liver, and the stomach) are not visible, but life cannot exist without them."—W. Larry Richards, *The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier—1 Corinthians* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1997), pp. 216, 217.

How did the early church at its very beginning display the kind of unity God had intended? *Acts 1:14, 2:1, 4:32.*

How's your local church doing in terms of the kind of unity depicted by Paul or as in those verses in Acts? If you are divided in certain areas, what can you yourself do to help bring about a change?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: *Galatians 6:10.*

Teachers Aims:

1. To bring home the fact that unity can be found only in Jesus Christ.
2. To understand that even brothers and sisters in the faith are, unfortunately, not always brotherly and sisterly.

Lesson Outline:

I. Diverse, Yet One.

- A. With the church's presence in over two hundred countries and growing, unity is a global challenge.
- B. Paul compares the church to the human body. No matter how small, each member of the body of Christ has a function and work to do.
- C. To avoid division over doctrinal differences, power struggles, and ethnic tensions, we must humbly submit ourselves to God and seek divine wisdom to govern our words and actions.

II. First, Be a Servant.

- A. Jesus came to serve as a minister to fallen humanity.
- B. The mother of James and John desired the best positions in heaven for her sons.
- C. Her sons craved power and prestige in heaven.

III. Difficult People.

- A. To keep from being part of the problem in the church family, one must strive to be part of the solution.
- B. Judas Iscariot was a traitor and a difficult person, but Jesus loved him like a brother.

Summary: A bicycle wheel is a wonderful object lesson in unity. The spokes on the rim of the wheel merge closer and closer together as they reach the center. So if we, with all our diversities and personalities, would leave the perimeter of our Christianity and approach Jesus, the center of our joy, we would find ourselves becoming closer and closer to one another.

COMMENTARY

I. Unity and Uniformity.

It is common in Christian circles today to distinguish between unity and uniformity. Unity can perhaps be described as a commonality of purpose and mission, and to some extent, a shared core of belief, although the question of which beliefs constitute that core and how these beliefs should be framed remains a matter of debate.

Uniformity, on the other hand, is usually defined as conformity

The Beauty of Diversity

The McDonald’s restaurant chain has tens of thousands of restaurants worldwide. Whether in Pakistan or in the U.S.A., in Hungary or in South Africa, you will find the golden arches. And you can be sure the product is always the same. The burgers will always have the same size and weight, and the milk shakes always come in three tastes and in the same size cups. Some might call this unity. But this kind of similarity has nothing to do with real unity; instead, this is uniformity, and there’s an important distinction between the two. In our thinking about the unity of the church, we must be careful not to confuse uniformity with unity.

What are some of the characteristics of the unity that the church ought to display? What is emphasized, and what is not mentioned? *John 10:16; 17:11, 21; Eph. 4:3, 13; Phil. 2:2.*

“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.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 179.

Ellen White’s words, in the context of the texts listed above, are so crucial to an understanding of unity. We can come from different ethnic, national, religious, and economic backgrounds, but at the foot of the cross, we are all the same: sinners in need of God’s grace.

And yet, the hand is not the foot, the foot is not the eye, and the eye is not the heart; all are different—all have different compositions, different functions, different roles. If the eyes demanded that the heart be like them, the body would soon be dead; if the heart demanded that the eyes be like them, the body would be blind.

Thus, because our church is so different—composed of various national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, many of which have clashed over these differences—our unity must be found in something that, while not denying these differences, transcends them. And for us as Adventists, that must be Jesus Christ and the common mission He has given to us. This side of heaven national, ethnic, and political differences will remain; but as Adventist Christians, with a common Savior, a common mission, a common message, we should seek, through God’s grace, never to allow these things to disrupt the unity that God seeks for His church. Admittedly, this isn’t always easy. But if we are called to love our enemies, we certainly should be able to love fellow church members, should we not?

If any ethnic, national, or political issues are dividing your church, what can you do to pull people to the Cross, the only true solution to the problem?

to an outward set of signs that clearly indicates to a believer that he or she is among his or her kind of people. Examples of this would include the presence of a certain kind of music played on certain kinds of instruments, preferably taken from a hymnal that is easily identifiable even across linguistic lines.

Usually one gets the sense that unity is good, while uniformity is bad. This is not necessarily the case. It is true that uniformity can be a tool for keeping people with disturbing habits or customs from infringing on one's comfort zone. While such an impulse is human and even understandable, it must be fought if we are serious about taking the gospel to all people. Christ's church is not a club for hobbyists.

Yet, some uniformity may be helpful. The relative similarity of Seventh-day Adventist worship across the globe has arguably been a major factor in creating the unity of mind and mission that has—most of the time, one hopes—characterized the world church. We are human, after all, and respond to outward signs. It is much easier to feel unified if one looks unified.

There are also practical uses for habits that may appear to be arbitrary. For example, one may or may not accept that the King James Bible is the only valid translation. But whether or not this is the case, the universal use of this one translation—in the English-speaking world, anyway—made teaching and memorization of the Scriptures much easier.

The fact is that we do live in a pluralistic world, and in the future the church will need to determine how much of this pluralism is compatible with its core message and mission. How can we distinguish among differences that are merely superficial and incidental and those that actually change the content of our message?

II. Useful Quotes on Unity and Uniformity.

“Can pluralism in the Adventist Church be a blessing? Some would envision a melting pot in which diverse opinions are liquefied into sameness. Such a perspective can hardly make pluralism a benefit for the church. Others who see theology and doctrine as absolute objective truths may not accept differences of interpretation. . . .

“On the other hand, if we are willing to see pluralism as a mosaic in which different perspectives occupy interactive positions, thus revealing a picture that displays the full reality of God's truth, pluralism can be an enriching experience for Adventism.”—A. Gerhard van Wyk, “Dealing With Pluralism,” *Ministry*, vol. 68, no. 3 (March 1995), p. 7.

“Whether we like it or not, modern Adventism displays an increasing pluriformity. There is a variety in worship styles, in standards of behavior, and even in beliefs. . . . Many feel that this trend toward greater pluriformity endangers the unity of the church. Others, like me, are happy with this development: People with different cultures should have space to make their religion relevant to

The Ugliness of Division (*Num. 16:1; 1 Cor. 1:11, 12*).

During the 2000 General Conference Session, Andrews University professor George R. Knight gave a thought-provoking speech about issues he sees as threatening the church. Among many other things, he said: “[If I were the devil,] I would get as many Adventists as possible to think tribally, nationally, and racially. I would make the church one big power struggle, without regard to mission or efficiency. Having made that statement, I hasten to add that there are injustices that need to be rectified and complex situations that can never be made completely straight. My plea is that even in the most difficult and unjust situations we need to behave as born-again sisters and brothers, able to discuss these things without losing sight of the mission of the church, which makes the issues meaningful in the first place.”—George R. Knight, “If I Were the Devil,” *Adventist Review* (January 2001), pp. 14, 15.

There are numerous causes for disunity in the church. State, in a few words, what the core issues were in the conflicts mentioned in the following Bible passages: *Numbers 16:1-3; Acts 6:1, 2; 15:1, 2; 1 Cor. 1:11-17*.

Who is in charge? Who will benefit more than others? And whose theology is correct? These are the most common causes (often in some combination) of division in a local church or in a denomination. The issues themselves can be quite legitimate. Social groups—and this includes spiritual organizations—need to determine how matters of leadership and authority must be dealt with. When an organization consists of various subgroups, there must be a mechanism to ensure that the interests of these groups are safeguarded. Real problems are not to be swept under the carpet. But those who profess to follow Christ and want to imitate His nature will choose a strategy in which prayerful dialogue, a desire to understand one another, patience, tolerance, and love are the key concepts.

Look at some of the problems listed in the above texts. There were power struggles, doctrinal differences, and ethnic tensions, even cliques. How little has changed over the centuries. Again, why must we all come to the Cross and be broken if these problems are ever to be resolved?

their situation. Only if that happens can the church be truly their church. . . . Of course, extremes must, as usual, be avoided. Forcing one mode of acting and thinking upon the worldwide church would require a totalitarian monocultural approach that is doomed to fail in the long run. On the other hand, cultural diversity must never be understood in terms of total relativism. All cultures must be judged by the gospel. All cultures have some elements that can be embraced but also elements that must be rejected!”—Reinder Bruinsma, *It’s Time* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press®, 1997), pp. 82, 83.

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Matthew 5:43-47; John 13:14, 15; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Galatians 3:28; Jude 3, 4.*

- ① Generally, conflict within the church is destructive, rather than constructive. When might it be appropriate to challenge church members or even leadership?
- ② Does the fact that church members should share a general outlook and goals mean that individuality is taboo? What guidance does the Bible give us regarding the attitude that we should have toward differences among members and the management thereof?
- ③ In 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Paul states that just as the body is a unit composed of several parts, so is the church. Ask class members to share what part of the body they think they are, and why. (For example, as the teacher of the class, you might think you are a mouth, because you enjoy teaching.) Then ask each member to select another person in class, and say, for example, “Jennifer, I’m glad you are a _____ (mouth) _____, because I need a _____ (good teacher) _____ to _____ (help me understand the Bible) _____.”
- ④ Inside the church and outside, it is generally considered a good thing to encourage people to celebrate cultural and ethnic differences. Yet, the most horrible conflicts arise from precisely these differences. How can we keep these conflicts outside the church yet still celebrate such differences?
- ⑤ Christ’s example is a reproach to the politics we engage in. Why, then, are politics still in the church? How can church leadership on all levels exercise authority without becoming addicted to it?
- ⑥ We all must deal with difficult people in the church at one time or another. What can such people teach us about ourselves and our relationship with God?

Servanthood Versus Power Play

To be a servant is not our idea of success. We see success in terms of influence, of power, of the ability to direct and control others. It seems to be part of human nature to make comparisons between ourselves and selected others, with the desire to come out on top.

What fundamental principle did Jesus state in response to the request from the mother of James and John for a place of special prestige for her sons? *Matt. 20:20-27.*

If you study the above verses carefully, you will see clearly the contrast between sinful humanity and a perfect God. Here is first a mother, zealous for the success of her children; then there are the other disciples, indignant at what they must deem a power play. And remember, these are all followers of Christ (the mother came worshipping Jesus); yet, greed, jealousy, and selfishness are unveiled.

All this is contrasted to Jesus, who not only spoke the principle of servanthood but, in a way that our finite minds can barely grasp, lived it.

Read Matthew 20:28. What is Jesus talking about? How did He express this principle in the most amazing manner?

No question, many of the things that divide or threaten to divide the church would vanish were we to take seriously Christ's words about being a servant to others. Being great, or chief, doesn't necessarily have anything to do with office or prestige. Yet, it can have a lot to do with power, not power as the world sees it but power to change lives, to bring healing, to reveal to others the love and character of God. And this comes through influence—of being a good example and of revealing to others the spirit of Christ. That's true power and greatness.

It's one thing to talk about being a servant; it's another to act in that role. What are some practical things that you could do that would express the principle of servanthood in your own church body? How, for instance, does the foot-washing service represent this principle?

“Living in a variety of cultures, times, and places, the church may appear as disparate. The book of Revelation itself celebrates the Lamb who through the cross ‘didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation’ (Rev. 5:9). All, however, belong to one body, whose inner unity seeks and acquires outward expression in the profession of the same faith . . . and Christian conduct in a visible church.”—*Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2000), p. 562.

III. Unity and Uniformity in the Bible.

“ ‘I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one’ ” (*John 17:11, NIV*).

“And they sang a new song: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation’ ” (*Rev. 5:9, NIV*).

Witnessing

The church *is* a place for sinners. But it is not a place for strife. There is no excuse for having an unloving spirit in the house of God. When people visit our churches they should see something different about us. That something different should be unity. We cannot be faithful witnesses to them if disharmony exists among us. We may not always agree, but we can *disagree* in a Christlike manner.

Jesus showed His disciples that in His kingdom there is no room for contention. James and John asked to sit next to the throne of Christ, one on the left and one on the right. When the other disciples heard of their request, they were displeased with the two brothers. But Jesus assured the disciples that in His kingdom no one is to be above another. All are called to service just as Jesus Himself came to serve. (*See Mark 10:35-45.*)

First Corinthians 10:24 tells us to put the interests of others above our own. Discuss with your class members how this counsel can be applied to specific situations within a church. How can following this counsel stop disagreements before they even start? Discuss how a church in which each member wants her or his own way is a negative witness.

Our role as God’s people is not to be fed but to feed. We are to be a source of strength to other church members and to our community. When we all accept this job description, visitors and members will find in our churches a place of refuge, a family full of lovingkindness.

Dealing With Difficult People

Have you heard of the 20-80 principle? It suggests that 20 percent of the people you have to deal with produce 80 percent of the problems. Ask personnel directors or customer-service directors what their experience is, and you will find them in agreement. Virtually all pastors will confess that a relatively small percentage of their parishioners give them most of their headaches. Yes, unfortunately, not all people are as lovable and likable as we would prefer them to be (of course, others might and with some justification say the same about us, as well). Some people provide a serious challenge to our Christian experience.

Read Mark 14:43, 44; Luke 22:3-6, 47, 48; John 18:3-7. What did Judas do to Jesus? Why was his act such an act of treachery?

Few people in history have gone to their grave with such infamy as Judas Iscariot, who, with his betrayal of Jesus, brought upon himself eternal ruin. And yet, even knowing what Judas would do, Jesus still sought to save him.

Read Matthew 26:21-25. What happened here that showed that Jesus was still trying to work with Judas?

“But Judas was not yet wholly hardened. Even after he had twice pledged himself to betray the Saviour, there was opportunity for repentance. At the Passover supper Jesus proved His divinity by revealing the traitor’s purpose. He tenderly included Judas in the ministry to the disciples. But the last appeal of love was unheeded. Then the case of Judas was decided, and the feet that Jesus had washed went forth to the betrayer’s work.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 720.

What a powerful testimony to us of how we should treat those who are, for better or for worse, among us. Indeed, who hasn’t experienced personally how, sometimes, the most painful struggles we have are not with those whom we would deem our enemies but those whom we would deem otherwise our “brothers” and “sisters”? We have here an example from Jesus how we should respond.

Have you been betrayed by a Judas? If so, how can you, through the grace of Christ, respond as Christ did?

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: A man had quite a poor reputation for being childish, self-serving, and unfair in his professional and social interactions. He falsified incidents between himself and people of another culture. When weaker people in that culture responded patiently and kindly while he berated them, he reported that they responded violently. When they appropriately used authority in supervising their staff, he told others that the staff were being treated unfairly and rudely. By taking advantage of his community's prejudices, the man saved himself at the expense of the people who were members of the other culture.

What is to be the foundation of interactions among the family of God? Second Peter 1:5-10; 3:17, 18 offer some insights.

Thought Questions:

- ① Who are some of the Bible characters we remember because of how they used their influence? *Review Genesis 37–47, Numbers 12, Joshua 7, Daniel 3, Matthew 25, and Luke 15.* What principles can we learn from their situations that can guide us in how we influence others?
- ② Does Galatians 6:10 suggest that Christians should discriminate against people who are not their brothers and sisters in Christ? Explain your answer.
- ③ What are Paul's words to believers who want to erect barriers between brothers and sisters in the church? *See 1 Cor. 1:10.* Why are barriers created among believers?
- ④ What attributes of positive family relationships are revealed in the relationships between David and Jonathan; Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; Ruth and Naomi?

Application Questions:

- ① It has been said that God has no grandchildren. Do Christians have spiritual cousins? Explain your answer.
- ② What is the significance of the terms *brothers* and *sisters* that can help Christians establish boundaries in their relationships with one another and yet not become exclusive or snobbish?

Further Study: Read the chapter “Who Is the Greatest” in Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 432–442.

“In these first disciples was presented marked diversity. They were to be the world’s teachers, and they represented widely varied types of character. In order successfully to carry forward the work to which they had been called, these men, differing in natural characteristics and in habits of life, needed to come into unity of feeling, thought, and action. This unity it was Christ’s object to secure. To this end He sought to bring them into unity with Himself. The burden of His labor for them is expressed in His prayer to His Father, ‘That they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us;’ ‘that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me, and hast loved them, as Thou hast loved Me.’ John 17:21, 23. His constant prayer for them was that they might be sanctified through the truth; and He prayed with assurance, knowing that an Almighty decree had been given before the world was made. He knew that the gospel of the kingdom would be preached to all nations for a witness; He knew that truth armed with the omnipotence of the Holy Spirit would conquer in the battle with evil, and that the bloodstained banner would one day wave triumphantly over His followers.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 20, 21.

Discussion Questions:

- ① How does one determine what belongs to the unchangeable core of our beliefs in contrast to what are mere cultural expressions and can, therefore, be changed to fit the context of various groups? Why, for the sake of unity, must we be able to distinguish between the two concepts?
- ② Imagine that your local church has a membership of around one hundred. Most members are pleasant and easy to get along with. But a few are capable of destroying the atmosphere. They are very opinionated and have very strong convictions about what should and should not be done during a divine service. This situation clearly hampers the growth of the church. What would you advise?

Summary: The church must be characterized by unity rather than uniformity. There is beauty and richness in diversity as long as there is unity in Christ. Only as we all learn to surrender at the Cross can we have the kind of unity that Christ seeks for His people.