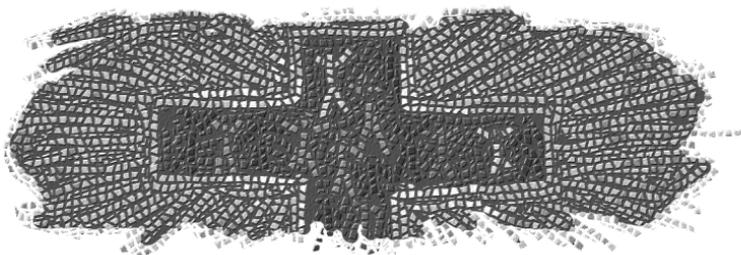


Unity Amid Diversity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 28:18-20, Rom. 12:6-8, 1 Cor. 12:28-31, Eph. 4:1-16.*

Memory Text: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (*Ephesians 4:4-6, NKJV*).

We have reached the midpoint of the Epistle. The first three chapters set forth the theology of Christian unity, a unity that overrides all the divisive factors in humankind. The last three chapters deal with the practical implications of that unity in the life of a Christian. So, Paul moves from theology to practice, from exposition to exhortation, from what God has done to what we should do in response to what God has done for us. Our theology must inform our morality, and our morality must reflect our theology.

Thus, Paul now turns his attention to the kind of life believers should live in accordance with the great theological insight of the mystery of Christ. The Jew/Gentile unity is no myth but a reality that demands a “walk worthy of the calling” (*Eph. 4:1, NKJV*).

The Week at a Glance: Why does Paul tell us to “walk worthy” of our calling? What does that mean? What kind of diversity will exist amid the unity that should be the hallmark of God’s church? What are the gifts given to individuals in the church? How does Paul describe growth in Christ?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 19.*

Walking Worthy *(Eph. 4:1-3)*

In the first three chapters, Paul talked so much about what God has done in Christ for us. Now, as a result, he tells us to “walk worthy” of our vocation, and he tells us how we should do that. What are the five graces foundational to Christian character, and what is your understanding of what each one means? (*Eph. 4:2, 3*). Compare what you wrote to what the lesson below says.

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Lowliness or humility. Romans and Greeks considered humility as a sign of weakness, but to the Christian, it is a source of strength. It is the opposite of pride. Pride is at the center of disunity (e.g., Lucifer in heaven), whereas humility is at the core of reconciliation as in the Incarnation and the Cross (*Phil. 2:2-8*).

Gentleness or meekness is essential to the unity of the church. Being the denial of self-assertion, meekness does not react even in the face of provocation. In the end the meek will inherit the earth (*Matt. 5:5*).

Patience or longsuffering is a characteristic of God Himself. He is “longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (*2 Pet. 3:9, NKJV*). Patience means endurance in the face of affliction, refusal to avenge wrongs, and not giving up hope for repairing ruptured relationships.

“*Bearing with one another*” (*Eph. 4:2, NKJV*) means more than mutual tolerance. It involves understanding the other person and a willingness to forgive and accept one another.

All these graces, of course, are rooted in love, and it is this active practice of love that preserves relationships and promotes peace and unity in the Christian community and beyond.

Humility, gentleness, longsuffering, bearing with one another, and love—how well did you manifest any of these traits in the past week? If there were something you could do over again, what would it be? More important, how can you avoid making the same mistake again?

Unity: Why Oneness? (Eph. 4:4-6).

Read Ephesians 4:4-6. What's the one crucial theme in these three verses, a theme we've already seen in this Epistle so far?

Ephesians 4:4-6 is one of the most majestic passages in the Bible. The structure of its construction, the grandeur of its prose, and the grounding of unity in the fullness of the Godhead are incredible. Should anyone dare ask the question “Why should Christians be one?” the answer comes in that unassailable argument: Because everything about Christian faith and life is one.

God has mandated the unity of the Christian body. *One God* through *one Christ* has redeemed us from sin, given to us *one faith*, regenerated us through *one Spirit*, made us members of *one body* through *one baptism*, and given to us *one eternal hope*.

As we study this sevenfold formula of oneness, another significant factor needs to be noted. The entire Godhead is involved in the oneness of the church. That is in keeping with the spirit of the Epistle, which often emphasizes the role of the Trinity in redemptive history.

God the Father—“who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Eph. 4:6, NKJV). He is all in all.

God the Son—“the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2, NIV), “the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27), the foundation of the church, His body.

God the Holy Spirit—the agency of our new-birth experience, which leads us to baptism (1 Cor. 12:13).

“In the fourth chapter of Ephesians the plan of God is so plainly and simply revealed that all His children may lay hold upon the truth. Here the means which He has appointed to keep unity in His church, that its members may reveal to the world a healthy religious experience, is plainly declared.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1117.

“Satan separates. God unites. Love binds us together.” So said the famous evangelist Dwight L. Moody. No one would like to be an agent of Satan, and all of us would like to be instruments of God’s love. Why are the five graces talked about in yesterday’s lesson so crucial in order for us to experience this unity that is discussed in today’s lesson?

Unity: Diversity of Gifts *(1 Cor. 12:28-31, Eph. 4:7-11)*

Ephesians 4:6 speaks of God as the “Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (*NKJV*). The emphasis that we all have the same father stresses the unity of the church. Now in verse 7, Paul says that “to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (*NKJV*). All have not received the same gift, nor in the same measure (*vs. 11*). Thus, Paul turns from “all of us” (*vs. 6*) to “each one of us” (*vs. 7*)—and so from unity to diversity in the church. Diversity does not mean division; it means there are different gifts, and these gifts should be used for the unity of the church. After all, the same Spirit that distributes the gifts allows us to work together for the strengthening and building of God’s church.

Read Ephesians 4:7-11. What is Paul telling us here? How do these words help us understand the gifts He has given us?

“When He ascended on high” (*vs. 8, NKJV*), He gave gifts to the believers; that is, when He ascended to heaven, He poured out the Spirit on the earth. But what are we to understand by verse 9, where Paul states: “He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth” (*NKJV*)? The contrast between “ascended” and “descended” is not spatial but theological. His ascent and exaltation to the presence of God is contrasted with His descent to, and deepest humiliation of, the Cross (*Phil. 2:5-11*). The victory in the descent and the exaltation in the ascent are celebrated by the giving of the gifts to the church, whose members Christ has plucked from the prince of darkness. By His victory over Satan and His ascent to “far above all the heavens” (*Eph. 4:10, NKJV*), Christ fills all things. He is the Lord of the universe and yet linked closely with the church on earth and fills her with His gifts.

Name the gifts listed in Ephesians 4:11. Compare these with gifts mentioned in Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28-31. What does Paul say about the nature and use of gifts? At the same time, ask yourself, “What is my gift? How have I used it recently? What practical ways can I enhance my gift in order to make it more effective in the Lord’s work?”

Unity: Equipped for the Ministry *(Eph. 4:12, 13)*

We have just been studying the gifts the Lord has given His church. Paul then lists, in Ephesians 4:12, two reasons for those gifts. What are they? How do they relate to each other?

The first deals with “the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry” (*NKJV*). The Greek for “equipping” comes from a word that means “to put right,” such as mending a torn net (*Matt. 4:21*) or setting a broken bone. Thus, “equipping of the saints” refers to preparing, training, and making them ready for the service to which they are called.

This raises the question, Who are the ministers of the church? According to the New Testament, all Christians are ministers, commissioned by the Lord Himself to go, make disciples of all nations, baptize, and teach (*Matt. 28:18-20*). The work of the ministry is not committed to a privileged few (clergy) but to all who profess the name of Christ. The Christian ministry is a people-to-people, one-to-one, ministry. No church member can claim exemption from the ministry, and no clergy person can claim exclusive privilege to the ministry.

The second reason for the giving of the gifts is “for the edifying of the body of Christ” (*Eph. 4:12, NKJV*). Whatever gifts we have—teaching, preaching, evangelism, healing, counseling, visiting, comforting, helping—are not to be hoarded for personal use. They are for the corporate good and growth of the church, and the hoarders will have their gifts taken from them (*Matt. 25:24-30*). The church can grow only when its members love and care for one another and together reach out to the surrounding community with the grace and love of Christ. Ministry of all members will hasten the day when the entire globe will be encircled by the saving message of Christ. In this way the church will exercise “the unity of the faith” and will receive the “fullness of Christ” (*Eph. 4:13, NKJV*). A person filled with Christ cannot remain silent when someone out there is without Christ. That is the motive of ministry.

Imagine what your local church would be like if everyone, using his or her gifts, were involved in the work of ministry. What can you do to help move your church toward this gospel ideal?

Unity: Growing Up in Christ (*Eph. 4:14-16*)

Ephesians 4:12, 13 closes with the note that spiritual gifts are given not only to equip the saints for the ministry of the church but also to lead them to the “measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (*NKJV*). Coming to Christ, experiencing the unity that transcends all divisions and being equipped for the ministry are not enough. Christians must grow in Christ. Verses 14-16 outline elements of such growth. (Verses 17-32, our study next week, continue to define this growth to emphasize living as the new person in full maturity.)

Ephesians 4:14 says we should “be no more children.” How do we understand this with Christ’s words in Matthew 18:3?

God wants us to be childlike but not childish. He expects us to “put away childish things” (*1 Cor. 13:11*) and assert the maturity of adulthood with which one can make a distinction between the spiritual and the worldly and take solid food instead of milk (*1 Cor. 3:2*).

What else is Paul warning us about in verse 14? How well have you fared in this area?

Firmness involves stability in what we believe, in how we sift truth from error, and in not being deceived by those who claim to have the truth. It requires strong grounding in God’s Word so that when the “trickery,” “craftiness,” and “plotting” (*Eph. 4:14, NKJV*) confront us, we may stand firm on God’s testimony (*Isa. 8:20*).

Paul also talks about “speaking the truth in love” (*Eph. 4:15*). Literally, it is doing the truth. And doing it in love. The church must distinguish between the gospel and heresy, and even here truth must put on love. “Truth becomes hard if it is not softened by love; love becomes soft if it is not strengthened by truth.”—John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, p. 172.

Finally, the ultimate sign of growth is unreserved commitment and obedience to Christ. We are the body, and every part and function of the body must be linked to, and integrated in, Christ.

Is “truth” still “truth” even if spoken in harshness? Defend your answer.

Further Study: *Spiritual gifts*. “It is the absence of the Spirit that makes the gospel ministry so powerless. Learning, talents, eloquence, every natural or acquired endowment, may be possessed; but without the presence of the Spirit of God, no heart will be touched, no sinner be won to Christ. On the other hand, if they are connected with Christ, if the gifts of the Spirit are theirs, the poorest and most ignorant of His disciples will have a power that will tell upon hearts. God makes them the channel for the outworking of the highest influence in the universe.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 328.

Christian growth. “The germination of the seed represents the beginning of spiritual life, and the development of the plant is a beautiful figure of Christian growth. As in nature, so in grace; there can be no life without growth. The plant must either grow or die. As its growth is silent and imperceptible, but continuous, so is the development of the Christian life. At every stage of development our life may be perfect; yet if God’s purpose for us is fulfilled, there will be continual advancement. . . . We shall become strong to bear responsibility, and our maturity will be in proportion to our privileges.”—Pages 65, 66.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Discuss in class the question asked at the end of Thursday’s lesson.
- 2 Look at the Ellen White quote above where she says that at every stage of development we may be “perfect.” What does that mean?
- 3 Read again Ephesians 4:14. How important is doctrinal purity to Paul? As a class, talk about how much importance should be placed on doctrine. In what ways might we be guilty of over-emphasizing or underemphasizing doctrine?
- 4 Suppose someone were to say to you, “How do I discover what my spiritual gift is?” How would you answer them? In general, how are we able to discover what our gifts are?

“Go In and Listen!”

by MARK SOLOMON

“Go in! Go in and listen!” a voice urged young Nolty Swartbooi. *Who’s talking to me?* he wondered as he walked past the Adventist church on his way to town in Upington, South Africa.

Nolty’s family were Christians. Once in their family devotions they encountered the Sabbath commandment, but their pastor told them that the Sabbath was no longer binding on Christians.

Then Nolty found a *Voice of Prophecy* correspondence course enrollment card and signed up for the lessons. Again he encountered the Sabbath question; again his pastor dismissed it.

As Nolty walked past the church, the congregation’s enthusiastic singing caught his attention. Nolty entered the little Adventist church and was greeted warmly. The church, he learned, was holding evangelistic meetings.

As he listened to the speaker, the message sounded familiar. *This is what I read in the Bible lessons!* he thought. Nolty returned every evening, and there he found answers to the questions that troubled him. Before the evangelistic meetings ended, Nolty was convinced that he had found God’s true church, and he must be a part of it.

But when Nolty told his father about his discovery, his father became angry. “That church is a sect!” his father roared. “Don’t go there again!” But Nolty was convinced that God had spoken to him. On Sabbath, Nolty asked the members to pray for him. He was willing to give up everything to worship God on His holy day. When he arrived home that afternoon, his father again warned him that if he continued disobeying him, he would have to leave home.

Nolty went to his room and prayed for wisdom and for strength to do what God commanded. Then he went to talk to his father. “Father,” he said, “you taught me to follow God’s commandments, and I have.” Then Nolty opened his Bible and read verse after verse relating to the Sabbath. His father listened in shocked silence to his son’s careful explanation. When Nolty finished the Bible study, he told his father, “I want do to what the Bible tells me. What do you think?” His father could not object; a month later Nolty was baptized.

Life is not easy in the region of South Africa where Nolty lives. Jobs are few, and hope is hard to come by. Alcoholism, HIV, and AIDS are rampant. Nolty would like to continue his education and become a pastor so he can work with youth, showing them that the hope they need is found only in Jesus.

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