

The Church



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Deut. 32:4; Ps. 28:1; John 17; John 15:1–5; Matt. 7:1–5; Matt. 5:23, 24; 18:15–18.*

Memory Text: “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; 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 17:20, 21, NKJV*).

The roots of the Christian church can be traced back to Adam, Abraham, and the sons of Israel. The Lord had called Abraham, and later the Israelites, to enter into a covenant relationship with Him in order to bless the world through them. In the course of sacred history, that covenant relationship was continued by the church.

The church was not an invention of the apostles or of any human being. During His ministry, Christ Himself announced His intention of establishing His church: “I will build My church” (*Matt. 16:18, NKJV*). The church owes its existence to Jesus Christ. He is its Originator.

According to the Gospels, the term *church* appears on the lips of Jesus only three times (*Matt. 16:18, 18:17*). This doesn’t mean, however, that He didn’t deal with the subject. In fact, He taught very important concepts relating to the church. Our study this week will center on two main ideas: the foundation of the church and the unity of the church.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 23.

The Foundation of the Church

Jesus said, “ ‘On this rock I will build My church’ ” (*Matt. 16:18, NKJV*). Who is the *rock* (*petra* in Greek) upon which the church is built? Some interpreters believe that Peter is the rock. They argue that the Lord used a play on words between Peter and rock (*Petros* and *petra*, respectively, in Greek)—a play that presumably would be clearer in the Aramaic language, which Jesus probably used. The fact is, however, that nobody knows with certitude the exact wording of Jesus’ statement in Aramaic. We have only the Greek text recorded by Matthew, which distinguishes between *Petros* (stone) and *petra* (rock), a distinction that should not be overlooked.

There are good reasons to affirm that *petra* refers to Christ. The immediate context of Jesus’ statement (*vss. 13–20*) centers on Christ’s identity and mission, not Peter’s. Besides, Jesus had previously used the image of building upon a rock, clearly identifying the rock as Himself and His teachings (*Matt. 7:24, 25*).

What is the symbolic meaning of “rock” in the Old Testament? *Deut. 32:4; Ps. 28:1; 31:2, 3; 42:9; 62:2; Isa. 17:10.*

When Peter and the other apostles heard Jesus speaking of building His church on a rock, they would have interpreted the image in terms of what it meant in the Old Testament—namely, a symbol of God.

Peter himself affirmed that Christ is “ ‘the stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone’ ” (*Acts 4:11, NKJV*), and he applied the term *rock* to Christ as the foundation of the church (*1 Pet. 2:4–8*). While he compared Christians in general to “living stones,” he applied the term *rock* (*petra*) to Christ alone. In the Bible no human being is called *petra*, except Jesus.

The apostle Paul used the term *petra* in reference to Christ (*Rom. 9:33, 1 Cor. 10:4*) and decidedly declared that “no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (*1 Cor. 3:11, NKJV*). We conclude, therefore, that the apostolic church unanimously understood that Jesus Christ Himself is the underlying *petra* upon which the church is built, and all the prophets and apostles, including Peter, are the first layer of living stones in the church’s spiritual edifice (*Eph. 2:20*).

Why is it important to know that the church, feeble as it sometimes may seem, is founded upon Christ Himself?

Christ's Prayer for Unity

It was Thursday night. After the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples went toward the Mount of Olives. On their way to Gethsemane, Jesus stopped and prayed for Himself, for His disciples, and for all who later would believe in Him through the apostles' preaching. Although the agony of the Cross was before Him, His greatest concern was not for Himself but for His followers. John 17 presents Jesus' longest intercessory prayer recorded in the Bible. It is encouraging to think that He prayed for everyone who believes in Him, including each of us.

Read John 17. What was Jesus' main prayer request to the Father regarding the believers? See especially verses 21–23.

Unity is crucial for the life of the church. We can measure its importance by the fact that four times Christ repeated His eager desire that His followers may be one (*John 17:11, 21–23*). In that special final hour, the Lord could have prayed for many other very significant and necessary things. Instead, He focused His prayer on the unity of the believers. He knew that the greatest danger for the church would be a spirit of rivalry and division.

Jesus' plea is not for uniformity but rather for a personal unity similar to His relationship with the Father. He and the Father are Two Persons, distinct from each other, with different functions. Yet, They are One in nature and purpose. By the same token, we all have different temperaments, backgrounds, abilities, and roles, but we all should be united in Jesus Christ.

This kind of unity does not happen spontaneously. In order to have it, we must fully accept Christ's lordship in our lives. He must mold our character, and we must surrender our will to His will.

This unity is not an end in itself. It is a testimony to inspire the world to believe in Christ as the Savior sent by the Father. Harmony and union among men of diverse dispositions is the strongest witness possible that God has sent His Son to save sinners. It is an unquestionable evidence of Christ's saving and transforming power. And we have the privilege of bearing this witness.

Many times unity is threatened by nothing other than selfishness. How can we make sure that we are not guilty of jeopardizing unity for no good reason?

Christ's Provision for Unity

What is the basis for the unity that Jesus prayed about for His church?

See *John 17:23* and *John 15:1–5*.

“‘You in Me, and I in you’” (*John 14:20, NKJV*) expresses the intimate relationship we need to have with Jesus. The presence of Jesus in our hearts produces unity. He brings to our lives two things that are indispensable for unity: the divine Word and divine love.

If we have Jesus, we will also have His words, which are actually the words of the Father (*John 14:24; 17:8, 14*). Jesus is “the truth” (*John 14:6*), and the Word of the Father “is truth,” as well (*John 17:17*). Unity in Jesus means unity in the Word of God. In order to have unity, we need to agree on the content of the truth as presented in the Word of God. Any attempt to attain unity without adherence to a body of biblical beliefs is destined to failure.

The Lord also wants His followers to be united by true love. If we have Jesus, we will have the perfect love the Father has for the Son (*vs. 26*). This love is not a temporary emotion or feeling but a living and permanent principle of action. In order to have true love, we must have less of self and more of Jesus. Our selfish pride must die, and Jesus must live in us. Then we will truly and sincerely love one another, making possible the perfect unity that Jesus prayed for.

“When those who claim to believe the truth are sanctified through the truth, when they learn of Christ, His meekness, and lowliness, there will be complete and perfect unity in the church.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*[®], September 19, 1900.

It has not always been easy to maintain a high view of truth and to have deep love for one another at the same time. There is always the risk of emphasizing one at the expense of the other. There was a time when doctrine alone was considered the most important element for unity. Fortunately, this lack of balance has been gradually corrected. Today, however, we run the risk of going to the other extreme: to think that love is more important than truth for unity. We need to remember that love without truth is blind, and truth without love is fruitless. Mind and heart must work together.

The apostolic church exhibited the unity for which Christ prayed. “They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine [truth] and fellowship [love]” (*Acts 2:42, NKJV*).

A Great Obstacle for Unity

How can Jesus' words in Matthew 7:1–5 help us to avoid divisions and conflicts in the church?

It is much easier to see the faults in others than to see our own. To criticize gives a false sense of superiority, because the critic compares himself with other human beings who seem to be worse than he is. Our aim, however, is not to compare ourselves with others but with Jesus.

How many problems could we avoid if we would all obey the divine command: “ ‘ You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people’ ” (*Lev. 19:16, NKJV*). It is painfully true that “a whisperer separates the best of friends” (*Prov. 16:28, NKJV*).

On the other hand, there are circumstances when it is necessary to speak about another person. Before we do that, however, we should ask ourselves three questions:

1. *Is what I am about to say true?* “ ‘ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor’ ” (*Exod. 20:16, NKJV*). Sometimes we may report something as a fact while it is actually an assumption or a guess. Besides, we may unconsciously add our own subjective assessment, running the risk of judging erroneously the intentions of other people.

2. *Is what I am about to say edifying?* Will it be helpful for those who hear it? Paul admonishes us to speak only “what is good for necessary edification” (*Eph. 4:29, NKJV*). If something were true but not edifying, wouldn't it be better not to say it?

3. *Is it possible to say it in a loving way?* The way we say something is as important as what we say (*see Prov. 25:11*). If it is true and edifying, we have to be sure that we can say it in a way that it will not offend other people.

James compares the tongue with a little fire that kindles a great forest (*James 3:5, 6*). If we hear gossip, we shouldn't add more wood to the fire, because “where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases” (*Prov. 26:20, NKJV*). Gossip requires a chain of transmitters to be alive. We can stop it by simply refusing to hear it; or, if we have already heard it, avoid repeating it. “Instead of gossiping, thus creating mischief, let us tell of the matchless power of Christ, and speak of His glory.”—Ellen G. White, *The Upward Look*, p. 306.

There's no doubt about it: criticism of others can make us feel better about ourselves. What happens, however, when we compare ourselves with Jesus?

The Restoration of Unity

Why is reconciliation with an offended brother a prerequisite for acceptable worship? See *Matt. 5:23, 24*.

There were different kinds of offerings brought to the altar, but Jesus was probably referring to an animal sacrificed so the sinner could receive divine forgiveness. Before we can obtain God's pardon, however, we must make things right with others. Reconciliation requires a humble recognition of our faults. Without this attitude, how could we ask for God's forgiveness?

What three steps should we follow if someone has hurt us? See *Matt. 18:15–18*.

Jesus tells us that, instead of talking about the offense with others, we should speak to the erring person, not to criticize but to show the person his (or her) fault and invite him (or her) to repent (*Lev. 19:17*). With a spirit of meekness and tender love, we should make every possible attempt to help the person see his (or her) mistake, allowing him (or her) to repent and apologize. It is very important not to put the person to shame by making his (or her) error public. That would make the offender's recovery much more difficult.

Ideally, the private conversation will lead to repentance and reconciliation. However, if the offender does not admit wrongdoing, or is unwilling to make things right, the next recourse is to take one or two witnesses (*Deut. 19:15*) in an effort to persuade the erring person. They should not be personally involved in the situation in order to be in a better position to call the offender to repentance. If the offender refuses to hear their counsel, they can bear witness to the efforts that have been made on his (or her) behalf.

Finally, and only if the first two attempts have failed, we should "tell it to the church"—not yet for a disciplinary action but for an ultimate appeal to lead to repentance. From the beginning, the whole process has a redemptive goal (*Gal. 6:1*).

We should remember that redemption is the best way to bring healing for everyone involved in a dispute. When someone has hurt us, why do we so often not follow the procedure that Jesus gave? How can we learn to not let a desire for revenge cloud our thinking?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “Christian Unity,” pp. 236–248, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5; “One With Christ in God,” pp. 239–243, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8.

“Union is strength; division is weakness. When those who believe present truth are united, they exert a telling influence. Satan well understands this. Never was he more determined than now to make of none effect the truth of God by causing bitterness and dissension among the Lord’s people.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 236.

“We should endeavor to think well of all men, especially our brethren, until compelled to think otherwise. We should not hastily credit evil reports. These are often the result of envy or misunderstanding, or they may proceed from exaggeration or a partial disclosure of facts.”—Page 58.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How do you deal with people who—though their doctrine (you are sure) is wrong—are kind, accepting, and loving, despite your differences? How should you relate to them? On the other hand, how do you deal with people who, though you agree with them theologically, are harsh, judgmental, and unloving toward anyone who doesn’t see things exactly as they do?
- 2 However important unity is to the Christian church, how well has that unity been maintained? How do you think a non-Christian, looking at Christianity, would view the idea of “Christian unity”?
- 3 Jesus instructs us to forgive those who hurt us. But what if they have not repented and do not ask us to forgive them? How are we to relate to them?
- 4 What is the relationship between love and discipline?
- 5 The ecumenical movement claims to be an attempt to create the unity that Christ prayed for. However well-intentioned the motives that some might have, what problems can we see with the ecumenical movement, apart from the obvious issues regarding last day events?
- 6 “We should endeavor to think well of all men, especially our brethren, until compelled to think otherwise.” How should we understand that sentence, especially in light of the fallen nature of humanity?

The Tithe Receipt

Charlie Tui, like many young men in the island nation of Vanuatu, had come from an outer island to the capital city looking for work. Charlie found a job and moved into a barracks with other young men from his home island. The friends spent their weekends drinking and smoking.

But one man was different. Jeffrey didn't smoke or drink, and he wasn't interested in using marijuana. The other men learned that Jeffrey had become a Seventh-day Adventist after attending an Adventist secondary school. Charlie and his friends teased Jeffrey mercilessly.

One day Frank, one of the guys in the barracks, found a slip of paper near Jeffrey's bed. It was a tithe receipt from an Adventist church. "Hey, Jeffrey! Do you really give this much money to a church?" he asked, teasing.

Jeffrey answered simply that God demands one-tenth of our income. The guys were surprised, because on their island their families had paid their pastor with a basket of food or a chicken. They sat down to listen as Jeffrey explained important doctrines of the Bible. Surprised by their interest, Jeffrey asked if they wanted to know more about the Adventist church, and several of the men agreed. Jeffrey invited a pastor to come to the barracks to study with his friends. About ten of the men met with the pastor each week.

Charlie lost interest in the Bible studies, but three others joined the Adventist Church. Charlie's life changed too—for the worse. While out partying with friends, he was injured in an automobile accident that killed the driver's girlfriend. When Charlie sobered up, he was haunted knowing that he could have died as well.

Then Frank, one of his friends who had become an Adventist, invited Charlie to attend meetings at his church. Charlie agreed. This time he listened carefully and realized that the speaker told the truth. He wanted to know more.

Charlie invited his girlfriend, Agnes, to join him. She didn't want to, but she reluctantly agreed. Charlie asked for prayer to stop drinking and smoking, and God delivered him. He prepared for baptism, but Agnes took longer to be convinced. Two years later she, too, joined God's remnant church. They were married.

Charlie's and Agnes's families resist their invitations to consider the Adventist faith, but at least now the families speak to the couple. Charlie and Agnes pray for opportunities to share their faith with them.

Charlie credits Jeffrey's dropped tithe receipt for first opening his heart's door to God's message. Faithfulness to God in tithes and offerings brings unexpected blessings.

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