

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 Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *John 17:20, 21*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Identify the characteristics of a unified church, contrasting the ideas of unity versus uniformity.

Feel: Experience the blessing of belonging to a unified worldwide spiritual family.

Do: Unite with some local Christian fellowship, investing time, energy, talents, and financial resources to expand God's kingdom.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Unity Characterizes the Authentic Church.

A How does disunity paralyze the church's ability to accomplish its missions?

B How does unity differ from uniformity, and why is it important that the two not be confused?

C What is Christ's provision for unity, and what implications does that carry for the personal devotional lives of believers?

II. Feel: Belonging to a Spiritual Family Opens Unlimited Opportunities for Blessing Others and Being Blessed.

A How does feeling united with other believers affect the Christian's personal emotional health?

B How would critical and censorious attitudes affect church unity?

C How should the emotional aspects of church life (think: feeling, love, fellowship) be balanced with the ethical aspects (think: doctrine, truth, principles)?

III. Do: Church Membership Seals the Individual's Commitment to Specific Church Families.

A Why is church membership responsible and advantageous? Compare the attitudes of people who marry and people who just live together. What difference does the marital commitment make?

B Why is church membership meaningless without commensurate investments of energy, creativity, and financial resources? How does this compare to stale marriages wherein partners contribute nothing to the relationship?

► **Summary:** The church best serves both members and community when it is unified.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *John 17:20, 21*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Without the unity Jesus intended, Christ's bride, the church, is weakened beneath the level that is necessary for expanding God's kingdom.

Just for Teachers: Athletic squads, volunteer organizations, multinational corporations, renowned symphonies, small businesses, political parties, national governments, and so on, disintegrate, failing to accomplish their respective missions whenever disunity afflicts their constituencies. Is Christ's bride, the church, excluded from this pattern? Satan's industrious associates guarantee that the church is not exempt from attack. Demonic forces exploit multiple weaknesses within God's kingdom: egocentric personalities; intentional and unintentional miscommunication; natural divisions such as gender, nationality, and ethnicity; sensitive dispositions; belligerent attitudes; self-righteous viewpoints; plus thousands more. Are churches defenseless against such an onslaught?

Our current scriptural investigation provides answers, resources, procedures, and strategies for safeguarding church unity. Contemporary application of these timeless principles, however, depends upon Spirit-led discernment. Remember, Heaven's inexhaustible resources are at your class's disposal. Teach, believing that God's Spirit can use your class to unify the denomination. He can!

Opening Activity: This activity suggests that you bring one breakable, dividable object to which you have easy access. First, discuss the purpose of the object. Next, discuss the value of the object. Finally, discuss how the object functions. Can the object achieve its purpose if it shatters into pieces? How valuable is the object if it cannot achieve its purposes? Can your object function if it is divided? If yes, how will it do so? If no, why will it not? Next, discuss what the purpose of the church is. Ask, "What makes the church valuable?" Discuss how the various facets of the church function and coordinate with each other. What happens to the church's ability to accomplish its God-given mission whenever divisions creep in? How can the brokenness of churches be restored so that God's mission can make progress? How can unity be maintained so that churches never lose their effectiveness? Can unity be maintained without uniformity? How does unity differ from uniformity? How does unity contribute to the achievement of God's purposes for the church?

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

Just for Teachers: Three emphases are essential to the successful presentation of this week's lesson. The first is theological: Why is unity necessary and important? The answers plunge deeper than human kindness and mutual respect or the accomplishment of Christ's mission. Why are these important? What do kindness, harmony, and respect signify? The second is practical: How can the church fulfill the gospel commission when divided? Our third consideration centers around our Exemplar—God. Should disharmony, jealousy, or conflict have fomented division within the Godhead, where would Christians be today?

I. The Church's One Foundation, Christ *(Review Matthew 7:24, 25; 16:18; and Acts 4:11 with your class.)*

Some theologies postulate that Matthew 16:18 designates Peter as the foundation of Christ's church. Would Christ really appoint cowardly, impetuous, foul-mouthed Peter to be Christianity's foundation? Our bad behavior sometimes makes things look that way! Human behavior notwithstanding, Jesus offered something infinitely better: Himself. Peter, whom Christ once asked to identify Him, later recognized that Jesus was the Chief Cornerstone of God's church (*Acts 4:11, 1 Pet. 2:4–8*). Human strength and administrative capability were insufficient for guiding this fledgling institution to victory. The power of God's Spirit and His infinite wisdom were required. Other foundations might temporarily appear capable, but an everlasting God, providing Spirit-guided successors (*Eph. 2:20*), was absolutely necessary.

Consider This: In what ways have contemporary church actions suggested that believers think that the church can have mere human foundations? How can Christians ascertain when earthly traditions, willful temperaments, and humanistic philosophies have supplanted Christ and His Word as the church's solitary foundation? How should believers address this condition and correct it?

II. United Prayer Lines *(Review the lines of Christ's prayer for unity recorded in John 17 with your class, giving special attention to verses 21–23.)*

The context of Christ's intercessory prayer is outlined in the opening verses of John 17. Christ's mission was restoring the broken relationship between God and His people. Union with God was accomplished through

Christ's atonement. Knowing God signified receiving everlasting life.

Christ's burden throughout John 17 becomes the ongoing success of His mission. Crucifixion was imminent. There was no predecessor along the pathway Christ was taking. Never had a mortal vanquished sin and death. Prophetic utterances (Isaiah) and apocalyptic literature (Daniel) predicted His triumph. Certainly Christ trusted His heavenly Father and believed these promises, but emotionally He agonized when contemplating the awesome undertaking ahead. Should He successfully pioneer the path through death, could His disciples shoulder the mission during His absence? The heavenly Counselor was promised, but would His disciples willingly submit their opinions, dispositions, and divisive temperaments? Shortly, Jesus would ascend heavenward, and His infant bride would be entrusted to the sons of Thunder (James and John) and the Rolling Stone (Peter). Their final hours together were spent disputing who would occupy the loftiest positions within Christ's government. These men misunderstood the harmonious framework Jesus had wonderfully modeled (oneness with the Father, oneness with the Spirit). Would His fledgling movement collapse?

Oneness and unity burden His final words. That union with God that alone brings salvation depended upon their complete surrender. Their union with one another depended upon their union with God. These two unions ran in parallel pathways. Destroying their human unity would impair, if not destroy, their union with God, which is everlasting life. Perfect unity would enable them to effectively bear witness to the world and, thus, fulfill the gospel commission. Disunity would cripple that enterprise and compromise the mission.

Consider This: What things might you be doing that bring disunity to your church? Would you continue doing those things if you realized that this stubbornness was compromising your saving relationship with God? How would you continue your course if you realized that the church's witness was being compromised, by blockading the entry of nonbelievers?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The construction of a bicycle wheel provides a helpful illustration regarding unity. The individual spokes are farther apart at the rim than they are at the hub. The closer they come to the hub, the closer they are to one another. The humble Galilean who sacrificed His life at Calvary is our Hub. Many Christians, however, live on the periphery at the rim. They trivialize the spiritual life through self-serving theologizing. Thirsting souls want to know God so they can experience eternal life. They need to share how God has become real in their lives. We draw close to the Hub through sincere conversations with God and profound scriptural exploration. As believers draw nearer to God, they draw nearer to their like-minded brothers and sisters. If unity was ever needed, we sure do need it now. How can believers achieve and experience the unity that God generously offers them?

Activity: Using a poster-sized drawing of a bicycle wheel or an actual wheel, discuss the things that currently divide churches. Which things are peripheral? Discuss the things that draw us closer to Jesus and to God's will for our lives—individually and as a church. Which things are essential? Remember that biblical truth can never be compromised, and unity with error is phony; but the essentials of salvation and Christian living are neither complicated nor convoluted. What is the source of theological wrangling? We may well be astonished at how simple the key to unity really was when we enter heaven.

Substitute Activity: Bring a bicycle wheel or merely draw a wheel with spokes on paper or ask class members to visualize one in their minds. Discuss the things that currently divide churches. Point out that the closer believers are to the center of the hub, the closer they are to one another and the less divided they are. Which divisive issues are peripheral? Discuss the things that draw us closer to Jesus. Which things are essential? Remember that biblical truth can never be compromised, and unity with error is phony; but the essentials of salvation and Christian living are neither complicated nor convoluted. After generations of theological wrangling, we may well be astonished at how simple it really was when we enter heaven.

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: **Matthew 18 outlines procedures and processes whereby church conflict may be resolved. Seldom, however, is this counsel completely followed, even when it is known. Jesus established reconciliation with offended brothers (and sisters) as a prerequisite for acceptable worship. Christian unity is not merely a desirable outcome, it is an essential ingredient. Balloons without air are merely stretchy colorful plastic or rubber. Like the air to a balloon, so is the Spirit to a spiritual life. The Spirit is given to those who make reconciliation priority one.**

Activity: Create promotional materials built upon this week's study and centered on the three reconciliation steps outlined in Matthew 18:15–18. Choose your most artistic member to supply simple drawings or caricatures, even stick figures, to illustrate the principles. Modernize the language into twenty-first-century idioms. Create posters, brochures, flyers, bulletin inserts, or banners. Make a video presentation or a PowerPoint presentation.

Substitute Activity: Develop a strategy for encouraging unity built upon this week's study and centered on the three reconciliation steps outlined in Matthew 18:15–18. Modernize the language of this passage to address current circumstances, situations, and twenty-first-century experiences. Describe in detail the methods of presentation you will utilize in your church setting.