

The Unity of the Gospel



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Gal. 2:1–14, 1 Cor. 1:10–13, Gen. 17:1–21, John 8:31–36, Col. 3:11.*

Memory Text: “Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (*Philippians 2:2, ESV*).

Protestant reformer John Calvin believed that disunity and division were the devil’s chief devices against the church, and he warned that Christians should avoid schism like the plague.

But should unity be preserved at the cost of truth? Imagine if Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, had, in the name of unity, chosen to recant his views on salvation by faith alone when he was brought to trial at the Diet of Worms.

“Had the Reformer yielded a single point, Satan and his hosts would have gained the victory. But his unwavering firmness was the means of emancipating the church, and beginning a new and better era.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 166.

In Galatians 2:1–14, we find the apostle doing everything in his power to maintain the unity of the apostolic circle in the midst of attempts by some believers to destroy it. But as important as that unity was to Paul, he refused to allow the truth of the gospel to be compromised to achieve it. Therefore, while there is room for diversity within unity, the gospel must never be compromised in the process.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 15.

The Importance of Unity

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10–13. What does this passage tell us about how important Paul believed unity in the church was?

Having refuted the allegations that his gospel was not God-given, Paul directs his attention in Galatians 2:1, 2 to another charge being made against him. The false teachers in Galatia claimed that Paul's gospel was not in harmony with what Peter and the other apostles taught. Paul, they were saying, was a renegade.

In response to this charge, Paul recounts a trip he made to Jerusalem at least fourteen years after his conversion. Though we're not totally sure when that trip took place, no trip in antiquity was an easy affair. If Paul traveled by land from Antioch to Jerusalem, the three-hundred-mile trip would have taken at least three weeks and would have involved all kinds of hardships and dangers. Yet, in spite of such difficulties, Paul undertook the journey, not because the apostles had summoned him but because the Spirit had. And while he was there, he set his gospel before the apostles.

Why did he do that? Certainly not because he had any doubt about what he was teaching. He certainly did not need any kind of reassurance from them. After all, he already had been proclaiming the same gospel for fourteen years. And though he did not need their permission or approval either, he highly valued the other apostles' support and encouragement.

Thus, the accusation that his message was different was not only an attack on Paul but also an attack on the unity of the apostles and on the church itself. Maintaining apostolic unity was vital, because a division between Paul's Gentile mission and the mother-church in Jerusalem would have had disastrous consequences. With no fellowship between the Gentile and Jewish Christians, then "Christ would be divided, and all the energy which Paul had devoted, and hoped to devote, to the evangelizing of the Gentile world would be frustrated."—F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), p. 111.

What are some issues that threaten the unity of the church today? More important, after we define them, how do we deal with them? What issues are more important than unity itself?

Circumcision and the False Brothers

Why was circumcision such a focal point in the dispute between Paul and certain Jewish Christians? (See *Gen. 17:1–22; Gal. 2:3–5; 5:2, 6; and Acts 15:1, 5.*) Why is it not that hard to understand how some could have believed that even the Gentiles needed to undergo it?

Circumcision was the sign of the covenant relationship that God established with Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation. Although circumcision was only for Abraham's male descendants, everyone was invited into the covenant relationship with God. The sign of circumcision was given to Abraham in Genesis 17. This occurred *after* Abraham's disastrous attempt—by fathering a child with his wife's Egyptian slave—to help God fulfill His promise to him of a son.

Circumcision was a fitting sign of the covenant. It was a reminder that the best-laid plans of humans can never accomplish what God Himself has promised. Outward circumcision was to be a symbol of circumcision of the heart (*Deut. 10:16, 30:6, Jer. 4:4, Rom. 2:29*). It represents a stripping away of our confidence in ourselves and a faithful dependence on God instead.

During Paul's time, however, circumcision had become a prized sign of national and religious identity—not what it originally was intended to signify. About one hundred fifty years before Jesus' birth, some overly zealous patriots not only forced all uncircumcised Jews in Palestine to be circumcised, but they also required it of all men living in the surrounding nations who fell under their jurisdiction. Some even believed circumcision was a passport to salvation. This can be seen in ancient epigrams that confidently declare things such as, " 'Circumcised men do not descend into Gehenna [hell].' "—C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1975), p. 172.

It would be a mistake to assume that Paul was opposed to circumcision itself. What Paul objected to was the insistence that Gentiles had to submit to circumcision. The false teachers said: " 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved' " (*Acts 15:1, NKJV*). The issue, then, was not really circumcision but salvation. Salvation is either by faith in Christ alone, or it is something earned by human obedience.

Maybe today circumcision isn't the issue. But what (if anything) do we as a church struggle with that parallels this problem?

Unity in Diversity

Read Galatians 2:1–10. Paul says that the false brothers “slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery” (*Gal. 2:4, ESV*). **What are Christians free from?** (Read *John 8:31–36; Rom. 6:6, 7; 8:2, 3; Gal. 3:23–25; 4:7, 8; and Heb. 2:14, 15.*) **How do we experience for ourselves the reality of this freedom?**

Freedom, as a description of the Christian experience, is an important concept for Paul. He uses the word more frequently than any other author of the New Testament did, and in the book of Galatians the words *free* and *freedom* occur numerous times. Freedom, however, for the Christian means freedom *in Christ*. It is the opportunity to live a life of unhindered devotion to God. It involves freedom from being enslaved to the desires of our sinful nature (*Romans 6*), freedom from the condemnation of the law (*Rom. 8:1, 2*), and freedom from the power of death (*1 Cor. 15:55*).

The apostles recognized that Paul “had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised” (*Gal. 2:7, ESV*). **What does this suggest about the nature of unity and diversity within the church?**

The apostles acknowledged that God had called Paul to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, just as He had called Peter to preach to the Jews. In both cases, the gospel was the same, but the way it was presented depended on the people the apostles were trying to reach. Implicit in the above verse “is the important recognition that one and the same formula is bound to be heard differently and to have different force in different social and cultural contexts. . . . It is precisely this oneness which is the basis of Christian unity, precisely as unity in diversity.”—James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1993), p. 106.

How open should we be to methods of evangelism and witnessing that take us out of our “comfort zone”? Are there some forms of evangelism that bother you? If so, what are they, why do they bother you, and might you need to be more open-minded about these things?

Confrontation in Antioch *(Gal. 2:11–13)*

Some time after Paul's consultation in Jerusalem, Peter made a visit to Antioch in Syria, the location of the first Gentile church and the base of Paul's missionary activities described in Acts. While there, Peter ate freely with the Gentile Christians, but when a group of Jewish Christians arrived from James, Peter—fearful of what they would think—changed his behavior entirely.

Why should Peter have known better? Compare Gal. 2:11–13 and Acts 10:28. What does his action tell us about just how powerfully culture and tradition can be ingrained in our lives?

Some have mistakenly assumed that Peter and the other Jews with him had ceased following the Old Testament laws about clean and unclean food. This, however, does not seem to be the case. If Peter and all the Jewish Christians had abandoned the Jewish food laws, a major uproar in the church certainly would have followed. If so, there would surely be some record of it, but there is not. It is more likely that the issue was about table-fellowship with Gentiles. Because many Jews saw Gentiles as unclean, it was a practice among some to avoid social contact with Gentiles as much as possible.

Peter had struggled with this issue himself, and it was only a vision from God that helped him to see it clearly. Peter said to Cornelius, the Roman centurion, after he entered his house, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean” (*Acts 10:28, ESV*). So, although Peter knew better, he was so afraid of offending his own countrymen that he reverted to his old ways. Apparently, that is how strong the pull of culture and tradition was in Peter's life.

Paul, though, called Peter's actions exactly what they were: the Greek word he used in Galatians 2:13 is *hypocrisy*. Even Barnabas, he said, was “carried away with their hypocrisy” (*NKJV*). Strong words from one man of God to another.

Why is it so easy to be a hypocrite? (Do we not, perhaps, tend to blind ourselves to our own faults while eagerly looking for faults in others?) What kind of hypocrisy do you find in your own life? More important, how can you recognize it and then root it out?

Paul's Concern *(Gal. 2:14)*

The situation in Antioch surely was tense: Paul and Peter, two leaders in the church, were in open conflict. And Paul holds nothing back as he calls Peter to account for his behavior.

What reasons does Paul give for publicly confronting Peter? *Gal. 2:11–14.*

As Paul saw it, the problem was not that Peter had decided to eat with the visitors from Jerusalem. Ancient traditions about hospitality certainly would have required as much.

The issue was “the truth of the gospel.” That is, it wasn’t just an issue of fellowship or dining practices. Peter’s actions, in a real sense, compromised the whole message of the gospel.

Read Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11. How does the truth in these texts help us understand Paul’s strong reaction?

During Paul’s meeting in Jerusalem with Peter and the other apostles, they had come to the conclusion that Gentiles could enjoy all of the blessings in Christ without first having to submit to circumcision. Peter’s action now put that agreement in jeopardy. Where once Jewish and Gentile Christians had joined in an environment of open fellowship, now the congregation was divided, and this held the prospect of a divided church in the future.

From Paul’s perspective, Peter’s behavior implied that the Gentile Christians were second-rate believers at best, and he believed that Peter’s actions would place strong pressure upon the Gentiles to conform if they wanted to experience full fellowship. Thus Paul says, “ ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?’ ” (*Gal. 2:14, ESV*). The phrase “to live like Jews” can be more literally translated “to judaize.” This word was a common expression that meant “to adopt a Jewish way of life.” It was used to describe Gentiles who attended a synagogue and participated in other Jewish customs. It was also the reason that Paul’s opponents in Galatia, whom he calls the false brothers, are often referred to as “the Judaizers.”

As if Peter’s actions weren’t bad enough, Barnabas got caught up in this behavior, as well—and he was someone who also should have known better. What a clear example of the power of “peer pressure”! How can we learn to protect ourselves from being swayed in the wrong direction by those around us?

Further Thought: For additional study on the issue of unity and diversity in the church, read Ellen G. White, “Investigation of New Light,” pp. 45, 47, in *Counsels to Writers and Editors*; “An Explanation of Early Statements,” p. 75, in *Selected Messages*, book 1; “Tactfulness,” pp. 117–119, in *Gospel Workers*; and “Manuscript Release 898,” pp. 1092, 1093, in *1888 Materials*, vol. 3.

“Even the best of men, if left to themselves, will make grave blunders. The more responsibilities placed upon the human agent, the higher his position to dictate and control, the more mischief he is sure to do in perverting minds and hearts if he does not carefully follow the way of the Lord. At Antioch Peter failed in the principles of integrity. Paul had to withstand his subverting influence face to face. This is recorded that others may profit by it, and that the lesson may be a solemn warning to the men in high places, that they may not fail in integrity, but keep close to principle.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1108.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Very few people enjoy confrontation, but sometimes it is necessary. In what circumstances should a church condemn error and discipline those who refuse to accept correction?
- 2 As the Seventh-day Adventist Church grows around the world, it becomes more and more diverse at the same time. What steps can the church take to make sure that unity is not lost in the midst of such diversity? How can we learn to accept and even enjoy the diversity of cultures and traditions among us while maintaining unity?
- 3 When sharing the gospel in a different culture, what are the essential elements that should not change, and what can be changed? How do we learn to distinguish between what must remain and what we can, if necessary, let go?

Summary: The insistence by some Jewish Christians that Gentiles must be circumcised in order to become true followers of Christ posed a serious threat to the unity of the early church. Instead of letting this issue divide the church into two different movements, the apostles worked together to ensure that the body of Christ stayed united and faithful to the truth of the gospel.

Rescue in the River: Part 2

The atmosphere grew tense. Some of the rowdies threatened the baptismal candidates with sticks. “We don’t want Christians in our village!” one man shouted. “We have our own gods and our own ways of worship. You must not follow these men who have come to teach their religion. You must continue in the way of our ancestors.”

“It doesn’t look like we’ll have a baptism today,” one of the pastors whispered to the other pastors. Perhaps they would have to return on another day.

Just then the pastors heard a young woman’s voice rise above the angry shouts of the crowd. It was Rebecca Tudu, one of the baptismal candidates. “Nobody is going to stop me from being baptized today!” she shouted. “We live in a free country. I will worship whatever God I choose. I choose Jesus Christ, and I am going to be baptized today whether you like it or not!”

With those words, Rebecca marched through the mob and on toward the baptismal site. None of the men moved to stop her. Seeing her fearless spirit, 15 other baptismal candidates followed her.

Those 16 new believers were baptized that day while the angry villagers looked on. The believers, empowered by the Holy Spirit and Rebecca’s brave action, took a bold stand for Jesus Christ.

Benjamin was among those baptized that day. His baptism brought another miracle into his life. Before his baptism, his eyesight was so poor that he could barely see. But after his baptism his eyesight improved, and now he is able to read the Bible without difficulty.

“Twice God has revealed Himself to me,” Benjamin testified. “I have no doubt that God is alive and hears my prayers.” Benjamin spends much of his time giving his testimony to the people in the nearby villages.

A week after her baptism Rebecca went to her home village to tell her parents what she had learned during the past few weeks. She shared the Bible truths she treasured and told them about the excitement on the day of the baptism. Her parents were eager to learn more about God and asked Rebecca to invite the pastors to visit their village and teach them.

The pastors came and studied with Rebecca’s parents for several weeks. One happy day Rebecca stood by a riverbank and watched her parents be baptized. Her two brothers also took their stand, along with others from her village.

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The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Philippians 2:2*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Examine the true basis of unity among believers who are as different as the Jews and Gentiles.

Feel: Appreciate the level of tension and concern surrounding the issue of circumcision in the light of the gospel of grace.

Do: Determine to stand fast on the foundational doctrines of faith and grace.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: A Fresh Face on an Old Tradition

A How had God's commands regarding circumcision become a legalistic tradition blinding many to the true means of salvation?

B Why is the gospel of grace the best means of unifying the widely diverse members of the church?

II. Feel: Trouble in the Church

A Why, despite the need for unity in the young church, did Paul feel it was necessary to publicly oppose Peter, who sought to take a less confrontational stand on Jewish customs?

B What grave dangers threatened those who didn't want to confront the issue regarding circumcision?

III. Do: Unity in Diversity

A What challenges does diversity bring to our church?

B What do we need to do to identify and build on the true basis of unity without compromising the gospel?

► **Summary:** By depending on Jewish traditions that blinded the early church to the critical matter of faith in Christ's work, the church was in danger of losing its understanding of the gospel.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Unity is a key characteristic of the true Christian church, but it is not merely an avoidance of conflict or the papering over of legitimate differences. It must be founded upon the gospel.

Just for Teachers: Emphasize that while tolerance and mutual respect are usually what are called for in church life, sometimes Christian unity is best served by confronting error in a seemingly divisive way.

Are you a splitter or a lumper? In most disciplines (biology, for example), it becomes necessary to classify individual examples within a larger framework. Say that you have a green, scaly creature. Is it a reptile, an amphibian, or something entirely new and unheard of? If it is an amphibian, is it a frog? Is it a toad? Could it even be a salamander? Or again, is it entirely new? If you are a biologist, your answer may depend on whether you are a lumper or a splitter. The lumper will look for the category that the new specimen has most in common with and will tend to regard the differences as less important. The splitter will focus on the differences and will tend to multiply categories and subcategories in order to define narrowly the identity of the specimen. An objective observer will usually have to admit that they both have a point.

These two drives exist in the church, as well, and most of us will have a preference one way or the other. Lumpers will tend to seek unity. At worst, this tendency becomes the search for peace at any price, in which immorality or rank heresy is ignored or glossed over to avoid conflict.

Splitters will tend to divide the church over arcane matters of doctrine or practice that have little bearing on matters central to Christian faith. We all have heard of churches and denominations that multiply into myriad feuding factions. If we examined them closely, we would probably find a predominance of splitters in such groups.

Paul sought unity, and in that sense, he was a lumper. But he would not accept unity unless it was based upon the one gospel. He was not willing to accommodate those who preached another gospel that was not *the* gospel, and in that sense, he was a splitter. As Christians we must know when to be a lumper and when to be a splitter, and only God can give us the wisdom and discernment necessary for that.

Discuss With the Class: What is true unity in the New Testament sense, and why might people who are naturally disposed to be either lumpers or splitters fail to grasp the meaning of it?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Emphasize the importance of unity in the church as a way of revealing the unity and harmony embodied in the Godhead and the grace and peace God gives us as individuals.

Bible Commentary

I. The Foundation of Christian Unity (Review John 17:21 and 1 Corinthians 1:10–13 with your class.)

Unity in the Christian church was, and is, not just an organizational imperative but a theological imperative. As Jesus Christ envisioned the future of His church, one of the first things He wished for them was “that they all may be one” (*John 17:21*). There were many reasons for this goal. Obviously, the church would function more efficiently if its members were united in faith, practice, and goals. That’s why even secular organizations and even for-profit corporations often require employees to agree to a mission statement.

And for a body of people claiming to serve God or a higher purpose, disunity just looks bad. If the church is supposed to heal the rift between God and the human race, everyone else would (as the Beatles said) “love to see the plan.” And they can see the plan in the way the church functions before their eyes. When they see a church in disarray, they are somewhat justified in wondering if there is anything to it at all. So, unity helps us to represent God better to people who don’t know Him yet but might be open to the opportunity.

And this brings us to the theological point. The church represents God to the extent that it is His body on earth (*Rom. 12:5, 1 Cor. 12:12–27, Eph. 3:6, 5:23*). If we leave aside the fact that a body is a functioning unity of many parts (not that this distinction of diversity isn’t important too), the church, in a sense, *is* Christ. Christ is God, and God is a harmonious unity of three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If the church is to reflect God, it should be a harmonious unity of the different personalities included in it. If this is not true most of the time, if the church is not consistently working toward this ideal, it becomes just another organization dedicated to perpetuating itself and serving selfish agendas. It really is that simple.

At the same time, Christian unity is not *just* unity or harmonious relationships among the members. Christian unity is unity in *Christ*. In the early church much of the disunity that manifested itself resulted from misguided confidence in human leaders, as Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 1:10–13. And, to an extent, this misguided confidence also had much to do with the Galatian dilemma. Paul’s opponents knew that they could cast doubt and suspicion on Paul as a person and, perhaps, inspire confidence in themselves

because of their charisma, personal qualities, or sheer brazen self-assuredness. In contrast, Paul focused on the one true gospel, which should be the true unifying force among Christians.

Consider This: What are some of the more obvious pitfalls of placing one's confidence in human leaders as opposed to in Christ Himself?

II. Let's Talk About Circumcision *(Review Galatians 5:2–6 with your class.)*

It is often said that Paul's opponents, referred to as Judaizers, wanted converts to Christianity to become Jews, and that is true. Some take this statement to mean that the Judaizers wanted to require Gentile Christians to become circumcised and observe other, more recondite, Jewish customs. Most scholars agree, though, that this was not true of all Judaizers. Furthermore, there was a place for righteous Gentiles in both the normative Judaism of the time and in the scheme of some Judaizing Christians. There was a class of people known as God Fearers: Gentiles who adopted some Jewish beliefs, customs, and practices. They participated in synagogue life, to some extent, and were accepted to a degree. But they were not full converts, primarily because they had not been circumcised. As such, the status they occupied was decidedly second class.

The Christian church at the time had not yet reached a consensus on what to do with or about Gentile converts, but they existed and played a major part in the early Christian churches. It was a *fait accompli*, in that sense.

It seems from the available biblical evidence that the church leaders in Jerusalem, while Jewish themselves and largely obedient to Jewish laws and customs, did not take an active part in the controversy as it was taking shape. Others, most notably the Judaizers whom Paul confronted in Galatia, actively took it upon themselves to "improve" the Gentile converts, holding out the prospect of a higher level of belonging or spiritual attainment to Gentiles who undertook full conversion to Judaism. An elite corps of superconverts, if you will.

Paul rightly saw this agenda as undermining the unity and equality before God that should exist in the church. The Judaizers distorted the gospel by suggesting it could be improved or fortified by something else and that people who added (or subtracted) that little something somehow occupied a higher place. This is why Paul states in Galatians 5:2 that anyone circumcised under such an assumption does himself no good and possibly does himself spiritual harm.

Consider This: We all have our ideas of how a good Christian should look or act. Some of these are rooted very deeply in upbringing or indoctrination in a given tradition. Some of our ideas may even have some scriptural basis. How can we avoid polluting the gospel by attempting to control people with our own ideas of how they should look or act?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Use the following questions to help your students to understand the importance of true Christian unity.

Thought Questions:

- ❶ In what ways did Paul strive to promote unity within the church, even as he confronted error and slander?
- ❷ How might the arguments of the Judaizers have made sense to people who only half understood the gospel? (After all, circumcision was biblical.)

Application Questions:

- ❶ How can we identify when a given policy or practice—whether erring in the direction of strictness or laxity—is destructive of unity in the gospel?
- ❷ Peter’s actions in pretending to adhere to customs he no longer regarded as relevant (*Gal. 2:11–13, Acts 10:28*) might, in some contexts, be seen as concern for unity. When does a desire to protect others’ sensibilities become, as in this case, cowardice and hypocrisy?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: In Galatians we see Paul confronting people who might be called apostles of disunity, if not apostles as such. While Paul’s opponents represent an extreme example of the spirit of disunity—often based upon completely arbitrary matters—this tendency exists in all of us. We may all place (or misplace) extreme value and importance on things that, in the light of the gospel and its message of grace for all, fade into irrelevance and unimportance. The following activity will help us all to recognize and change this tendency in ourselves.

Ask your class: “What do you regard as the outward manifestations of inward Christianity? Why do you regard this as important?” Be careful not to pass judgment on what anyone says. You are acquainted with the personalities and biases of your class; be careful with anything that might have a tendency to get controversial or personal.