

The Most Convincing Proof



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *John 11:51, 52; Eph. 2:13–16; 2 Cor. 5:17–21; Eph. 4:25–5:2; Rom. 14:1–6; Acts 1:14.*

Memory Text: “Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad” (*John 11:51, 52, NKJV*).

Last week we studied how unity is made visible through a common message, centered on Jesus as Savior and on the truths of Scripture to be emphasized in the time of the end. We are who we are because of the message that God has given us and the calling we have to spread it to the world.

This week, we focus on the visible unity of the church in its expression in the day-to-day lives of Christians and the mission of the church. According to Jesus, the church does not simply proclaim God's message of salvation and reconciliation. The unity of the church itself also is an essential expression of that reconciliation. In a world surrounded by sin and rebellion, the church stands as a visible witness to the saving work and power of Christ. Without the oneness and solidarity of the church in its common witness, the saving power of the Cross would hardly be apparent in this world. “Unity with Christ establishes a bond of unity with one another. This unity is the most convincing proof to the world of the majesty and virtue of Christ, and of His power to take away sin.” —Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1148.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 1.

Under the Cross of Jesus

Like many other spiritual blessings God gives His people, church unity also is a gift of God. Unity is not a human creation through our efforts, good works, and intentions. Fundamentally, Jesus Christ creates that unity through His death and resurrection. As we appropriate by faith His death and resurrection through baptism and forgiveness of our sins, as we join in common fellowship, and as we spread the three angels' messages to the world, we are in union with Him and in unity with one another.

Read John 11:51, 52 and Ephesians 1:7–10. What event in the life of Jesus is the foundation of unity among us as Seventh-day Adventists?

“Now this he [Caiaphas] did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad” (*John 11:51, 52, NKJV*). How strange that God used Caiaphas to explain the meaning of Jesus' death, even though Caiaphas did not know what he was doing in condemning Jesus to die. Nor did the priest have any idea of just how profound his statement was. Caiaphas thought that he was making a political statement only. John, though, used it to reveal a foundational truth about what the substitutionary death of Jesus meant for all of God's faithful people, who would one day be gathered “together into one.”

Whatever else we believe as Seventh-day Adventists, whatever message we alone are proclaiming, the foundation of our unity exists in our common acceptance of Christ's death in our behalf.

And, furthermore, we also experience this unity in Christ through baptism. “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (*Gal. 3:26, 27, NKJV*). Baptism is another bond that we Adventists commonly share, as it symbolizes our faith in Christ. We have a common Father; thus, we are all sons and daughters of God. And we have a common Savior in whose death and resurrection we are baptized (*Rom. 6:3, 4*).

Whatever cultural, social, ethnic, and political differences exist among us as Seventh-day Adventists, why should our common faith in Jesus transcend all such divisions?

Ministry of Reconciliation

Our world is certainly known for its disorder, troubles, wars, and conflicts. All these factors affect our lives at the personal, community, and national levels. At times it appears our entire lives are in conflict. But disunity and disorder will not prevail forever. God is on a mission to bring about cosmic unity. Whereas sin has resulted in disharmony, God's eternal plan for reconciliation brings peace and wholeness.

In Ephesians 2:13–16, Paul puts forward the principles that show how Christ acted in order to bring peace among believers: through His death on the cross Jesus made both Jews and Gentiles one people and destroyed the ethnic and religious barriers that separated them. If Christ was able to do this with Jews and Gentiles in the first century, how much more can He still bring down any racial, ethnic, and cultural barriers and walls that divide people within our own church today?

And from this starting point, we can reach out to the world.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17–21, Paul states that in Christ we are a new creation, reconciled to God. What then is our ministry in this world? What differences could we be making in our communities as a united church body?

As God's new creation, believers receive a crucial ministry—a threefold ministry of reconciliation. (1) Our church is composed of believers who were once alienated from God but, through the saving grace of Christ's sacrifice, have now been united to God by the Holy Spirit. We are the remnant, called to proclaim an end-time message to the world. Our ministry is to invite those who are still alienated from God to be reconciled to God and join us in our mission. (2) The church also is God's people reconciled to one another. To be united to Christ means we are united to one another. This is not just a lofty ideal; it must be a visible reality. Reconciliation to one another, peace and harmony among brothers and sisters, is an unmistakable witness to the world that Jesus Christ is our Savior and Redeemer. " 'By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another' " (*John 13:35, NKJV*). (3) Through this ministry of reconciliation, the church tells the universe that God's plan of redemption is true and powerful. The great controversy is about God and His character. Inasmuch as the church cultivates unity and reconciliation, the universe sees the working out of God's eternal wisdom (*see Eph. 3:8–11*).

Practical Unity

In 1902, Ellen G. White wrote: “What Christ was in His life on this earth, that every Christian is to be. He is our example, not only in His spotless purity, but in His patience, gentleness, and winsomeness of disposition.”—Ellen G. White, in *Signs of the Times*, July 16, 1902. These words are reminiscent of Paul’s appeal to the Philippians: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 2:5, NKJV*).

Read Ephesians 4:25–5:2 and Colossians 3:1–17, and then answer these two questions: In what areas of our lives in particular are we invited to show our allegiance to Jesus? How are we to be witnesses of the gospel of Jesus in our public lives?

There are many other passages of Scripture that invite Christians to follow the example of Jesus and to be living witnesses of God’s grace to others. We also are invited to seek the welfare of others (*Matt. 7:12*); to bear each other’s burdens (*Gal. 6:2*); to live in simplicity and to focus on inward spirituality instead of outward display (*Matt. 16:24–26; 1 Pet. 3:3, 4*); and to follow healthful living practices (*1 Cor. 10:31*).

“Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation” (*1 Pet. 2:11, 12, NKJV*). How often do we underestimate the impact of Christian character upon those who watch us? The patience manifested in moments of annoyance, a disciplined life in the midst of tension and conflicts, a gentle spirit in response to impatience and harsh words, are marks of the spirit of Jesus we are invited to emulate. As Seventh-day Adventists witness together in a world that misunderstands the character of God, we become a power for good and for God’s glory. As representatives of Christ, believers are to be known not only for their moral rectitude but also for their practical interest in the welfare of others. If our religious experience is genuine, it will reveal itself and have an impact in the world. A unified body of believers revealing the character of Christ to the world will, indeed, be a powerful witness.

What kind of witness do you present to others? What would one find in your life that would make them want to follow Jesus?

Unity Amid Diversity

In Romans 14 and 15, the apostle Paul addresses issues that deeply were dividing the church at Rome. His response to these issues was to invite the Romans to show tolerance and patience for one another and not divide the church over these concerns. What can we learn from his counsel?

Read Romans 14:1–6. What issues of conscience were causing church members in Rome to judge and not fellowship with one another?

It is very likely that these matters had to do with Jewish ceremonial impurity. According to Paul these were “disputes over doubtful things” (*Rom. 14:1, NKJV*), indicating that they were not matters of salvation but matters of opinion that should have been left up to individual consciences (*see Rom. 14:5*).

These disputes were first over the type of food eaten. Eating animals forbidden in Leviticus 11 was not the problem addressed by Paul here. There is no evidence that early Christians began eating pork or other unclean animals during Paul’s time, and we know that Peter did not eat any such food (*see Acts 10:14*). Also, that the weak ate only vegetables (*Rom. 14:2*) and that the controversy also involved beverages (*Rom. 14:17, 21*) indicate that the concern focuses on ceremonial impurity. This is further evident by the word *unclean (koinos)*, used in Romans 14:14. That word is used in the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to impure animals, not the unclean animals of Leviticus 11. Apparently there were some people in the Roman community who would not eat at fellowship meals because they were not convinced that the food was adequately prepared or had not been sacrificed to idols.

The same goes for the observation of some days. This did not refer to the weekly observance of the Sabbath, since we know Paul observed it regularly (*Acts 13:14, 16:13, 17:2*). This is likely a reference to the various Jewish feast days or fast days. Paul’s intent in these verses is to urge tolerance for those who are sincere and conscientious in the observance of these rituals as long as they did not think of them as a means of salvation. Unity among Christians manifests itself in patience and forbearance when we do not always agree on points, especially when they are not essential to our faith.

In class, ask this question: Is there anything that we believe and practice as Seventh-day Adventists that all who claim to be Adventists need not believe and adhere to?

Unity in Mission

Contrast the mood of the disciples during the Lord's Supper in Luke 22:24 with the one they had shortly before the Pentecost experience in Acts 1:14 and 2:1, 46. What made such a difference in their lives?

In Acts 1:14 and 2:46, the phrase “with one accord” also means “persevered with one mind.” This came as a result of their being together in one place, seeking in prayer the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to send them the Comforter.

As they waited, it would have been easy for them to begin to criticize one another. Some could have pointed to Peter’s denial of Jesus (*John 18:15–18, 25–27*) and to Thomas’s doubting Jesus’ resurrection (*John 20:25*). They could have remembered John and James’s request to receive the most powerful positions in Jesus’ kingdom (*Mark 10:35–41*), or that Matthew was a former despised tax collector (*Matt. 9:9*).

However, “these days of preparation were days of deep heart searching. The disciples felt their spiritual need and cried to the Lord for the holy unction that was to fit them for the work of soul saving. They did not ask for a blessing for themselves merely. They were weighted with the burden of the salvation of souls. They realized that the gospel was to be carried to the world, and they claimed the power that Christ had promised.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 37.

The fellowship between the disciples and the intensity of their prayers prepared them for this momentous experience of Pentecost. As they drew nearer to God and put aside their personal differences, the disciples were prepared by the Holy Spirit to become the fearless and bold witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus. They knew Jesus had forgiven their many shortcomings, and this gave them courage to press on ahead. They knew what Jesus had done for them in their lives. They knew the promise of salvation found in Him, and thus the “ambition of the believers was to reveal the likeness of Christ’s character and to labor for the enlargement of His kingdom.”—Page 48. No wonder the Lord was able to do powerful things through them. What a lesson for us as a church today.

It’s always so easy to find things in other people’s lives that are wrong. How can we learn to put aside the mistakes of others, all for the greater cause of doing God’s will in a united church?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “Unity in Diversity,” pp. 98–103, in *Evangelism*.

The following quote helps reveal how the early church, united in Christ, was able to maintain unity despite differences among them, and thus be a powerful witness to the world. “Within the church, Scripture illustrates how the Holy Spirit guided the early church in its decision-making process. This is done in at least three closely interconnected ways: revelations (e.g., the Spirit told the people what to do; Cornelius, Ananias, Philip; and perhaps the casting of lots), Scripture (the church reached a conclusion in which the Scripture was used), and consensus (the Spirit worked from within the community, almost imperceptibly, creating a consensus through dialogue and study, at the end of which the church realized that the Spirit was working within it). It appears that when faced with cultural, doctrinal, and theological controversies among the community of believers, the Holy Spirit worked through consensus in its decision-making process. In this process, we see the active role of the community of believers and not just its leaders, and the importance of prayer for discernment. The guidance of the Holy Spirit is sensed throughout the community’s understanding of the Word of God, the experience of the community and its needs, and through the experience of its leaders as they minister. Various church decisions were made through a process guided by the Holy Spirit in which Scripture, prayer, and experience were elements of theological reflection.”—Denis Fortin, “The Holy Spirit and the Church,” in Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, ed., *Message, Mission, and Unity of the Church*, pp. 321, 322.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, go over your answer to Wednesday’s question about how we decide on which teachings and practices are essential for us as Seventh-day Adventists and which aren’t.
- 2 How are we to relate to Christians in other denominations who, as we do, believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus?

Summary: The most convincing proof of unity is for brothers and sisters to love each other as Jesus did. The forgiveness of our sins and the salvation we share in common as Adventists are the best bonds of our fellowship. In Christ, we can thus show the world our unity and witness of our common faith. We are called to do nothing less.

Love Is the Best Medicine

By ANDREW McCHESNEY, Adventist Mission

A 30-year-old woman was admitted with a bad case of pneumonia to Blantyre Adventist Hospital in Malawi. When she didn't improve with antibiotics, missionary physician Tiffany Priester ordered an HIV test. The results came back positive. She had full-blown AIDS.

Priester explained to the family that it usually takes three weeks to treat pneumonia and there was a 50 percent chance that she would make it. But then the woman began to suffer kidney problems, and her chances of survival plummeted to 10 percent. Priester told the family that there wasn't much hope. "We believe in God," a family member replied. "We believe in miracles. Let's pray."

Surrounded by the family, Priester prayed for a cure and put the patient on a ventilation machine. The woman's kidneys shut down 24 hours later. All hope seemed lost. But then she began to recover. A few weeks later, she walked out of the hospital. "Medicine has its limits," Priester said. "The hospital does what it can do, and the Lord does the rest."

Priester, a U.S. cardiologist, worked for five years in Blantyre, the second-largest city in Malawi with a population of about one million. Blantyre Adventist Hospital—which employs six missionary doctors, two missionary dentists, and seven Malawian doctors—did not have a cardiologist for the decade before she arrived in 2011, a common problem in a country with only one medical doctor for every 88,000 people.

Priester's reason for mission is John 13:35, where Jesus says, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (*NKJV*).

One day, a Malawian woman complained that she awoke with her heart pounding every night around midnight. Tests came back normal, and other doctors might have written off the case as the result of bad dreams. "But that day I think the Holy Spirit prompted me to ask more," Priester said.

Priester learned that the patient had started having sleeping problems after meeting a self-professed prophet who had warned her that she would be raped at midnight. Priester asked the woman whether the man or God was stronger. "Put your trust in God," she said.

"You are the first doctor to tell me that God is strong," the woman replied.

This, said Priester, pictured left, is what it means to "love one another"—making an extra effort to provide physical, emotional, and spiritual healing.

"Sometimes it's the small things that set us apart," she said.

