

Images of Unity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Pet. 2:9; Exod. 19:5, 6; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Cor. 3:16, 17; 1 Cor. 12:12–26; John 10:1–11; Psalm 23.*

Memory Text: “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ” (*1 Corinthians 12:12, NKJV*).

As anyone who has studied the Bible knows, it is filled with images and symbols that point to realities greater than those images and symbols themselves. For instance, the essence of the whole biblical sacrificial system is, in a sense, symbolic of the much greater reality: Jesus and the entire plan of salvation.

Many other kinds of images are used in the Bible, and sometimes from the most basic elements, too—such as water, fire, wind. Depending upon the context, these are images for spiritual and theological truths. For example, when Jesus said, “ ‘The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit’ ” (*John 3:8, NIV*), the wind was used as a symbol for the Holy Spirit.

The Bible uses a number of images to describe the kind of unity we find in the church, the unity that God calls it to manifest before the world. Each individual image is not complete in and of itself. Instead, as a whole, these images reveal many things about church unity, such as the church's relationship to God, the members' relationships to one another, and the church's relationship to the community as a whole.

This week's lesson will look at some of the images and what they reveal to us about unity in Christ.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 10.

The People of God

Read 1 Peter 2:9; Exodus 19:5, 6; Deuteronomy 4:20; and Deuteronomy 7:6. What do these verses say about the special status of the people of God?

The church is about people, but not any kind of people. The church is the people of God, the people who belong to God, who claim God as their Father and Savior, and who have been redeemed by Christ and who obey Him. This image underscores the concept that God has had a people on earth since the introduction of the plan of salvation and that there is continuity between Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New. From the time of Adam, the patriarchs before and after the Flood, and Abraham, God has made a covenant with His people to be representatives of His love, mercy, and justice to the world.

God's people are called a "chosen generation," a "royal priesthood," and a "holy nation." These terms indicate that they are set aside for a special purpose: to "proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (*1 Pet. 2:9, NKJV*). This also is an echo of a description of God's gracious character, as described in Exodus 34:6, 7. "God acquired the church as His own special possession in order that its members might reflect His precious traits of character in their own lives and proclaim His goodness and mercy to all men."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 562.

Read Deuteronomy 7:6–8. What prompted God to select the descendants of Abraham as His people? How is this still applicable today?

Perhaps we could ask ourselves, What country today deserves the label of "holy nation" (another image of the church)? None. All nations and ethnic groups are composed of people who do not deserve God's love and grace. And though the Bible calls us to be a holy people, Scripture also teaches that the selection and establishment of Israel was based entirely on His love and not on any merits that human beings could bring to Him. The formation of God's people is an act of loving creation and—despite sin and apostasy on a national scale—God kept His promise to Abraham that through his seed, Christ, He would save His people. Just as the election of God's people was an act of His grace, so is their salvation. This theme reminds us of our common roots in the unmerited grace of God.

Why must we always keep before us the sacred truth that our salvation rests upon what Christ has done for us and not upon what we can ever do for ourselves, even if we are "the people of God"?

The Household of God

Another image of the people of God in the New Testament is the house or household of God. It is a metaphor of stones and buildings that highlights the intricate and interdependent nature of human relationships in the church. Peter refers to Christians as “living stones” (*1 Pet. 2:5, NKJV*). This metaphor contains a quality of permanency and solidity.

Read Ephesians 2:19–22. What key ideas does Paul emphasize in this passage? What does this image tell us about unity in the church?

In this passage, Paul combines two images of the church: one inert, a house or building; the other alive, a household of people.

A stone is not very valuable by itself, but when it is bonded with other stones, it becomes a structure that can withstand the storms of life. No Christian can be a stone alone, but must be associated with others in the fellowship of the household of God. For an edifice to be solid, it must rest on a strong foundation. Jesus Christ is this foundation, and the “cornerstone” of the house of God (*see also 1 Cor. 3:11*). The church also would cease to exist if it did not make Christ the cornerstone of its activities. The church is really about Jesus Christ: His life, death, resurrection, and return. The church forms a community of believers united to share the good news about Jesus to the world. The church’s agenda is Jesus: who He is, what He has done for us and does in us, and what He offers to anyone who will accept Him as Lord and Savior.

The image of a household also is very meaningful. This one rests on the relationships people have among themselves. It is a familiar image of father and mother, brothers and sisters. Ties between family members can be strong, and the accompanying loyalties often transcend all other outside ties. Loyalty is a big part of unity, for how could there be any kind of unity without loyalty, as well?

How does this image relate to the church? Church members also are part of one big family. We are linked, not only because we belong to the human family through our common ancestor Adam, but also because we are related to Jesus, the Second Adam, through our common “new birth” experience. Thus, we become united with each other, not just because of the doctrinal truths that we hold in common, but also in the experience of being converted souls who have a new life in Jesus.

Sadly, not everyone has had a great experience with his or her own family. Hence, that image might not mean much to them. How, though, can we as a church become the family that these people never had?

The Temple of the Holy Spirit

Another building imagery Paul uses is that of the temple of God or of the Holy Spirit. It is the image of a costly and valuable building. Along with 1 Corinthians 6:19, where the image refers to one's personal body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17 uses the image to refer to the most holy and precious edifice of the ancient Near East, God's temple.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17. What does it mean that the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit? What is Paul warning about in verse 17?

Obviously, Paul does not, in referring to the church, have in mind a physical temple or place of residence for God. The Greek of the New Testament makes a distinction between a "you" singular, in order to refer to one person, and a "you" plural, in order to refer to many people. In this case it is the latter. This metaphor refers to a corporate entity: together the Christians in Corinth form the temple of the Holy Spirit, and in a spiritual sense God resides among them.

For Paul, God resides within the Christian fellowship; hence, his warning that anyone who attempts to destroy this fellowship will suffer the consequences of the judgment. The unity of believers is at the core of this fellowship and of God's presence in this temple. Though this text is often used in the sense of taking care of one's physical body (which is, of course, what Christians are supposed to do anyway), that's not the specific point that Paul was making here. His message was, instead, a warning about those who would destroy the unity of the church.

Earlier in the chapter, Paul referred to what he considers as challenges to unity: "for where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you" (*1 Cor. 3:3, NKJV*). These attitudes and behaviors are real threats to Christian unity and cause the withdrawal of God's presence from His temple. In other words, conflicts in the church can destroy God's temple. Thus, he wants members to put away the attitudes and behaviors that do threaten its unity.

When conflicts erupt in the church, Paul's advice to the Corinthians is still applicable today: "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (*1 Cor. 1:10, NKJV*).

Envy, strife, and division—these are not just problems the church faced in Paul's day. We face them today, as well. What role does each one of us have in seeking to work through these problems in ways that will not threaten our unity?

The Body of Christ

Perhaps the best-known image of the church and one that speaks the strongest about the unity of its varied parts is the body of Christ. “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually” (1 Cor. 12:12, 27, NKJV).

Just as a body is a single unit that is made up of many different parts, each with its different function and responsibility, this is the church as the body of Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–26. How does this image of one body with many parts apply to your local congregation? How does it apply to a worldwide organization like the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 12 conveys the profound reality that authentic Christian unity is not just *in* diversity, and certainly not *despite* diversity, but rather *through* diversity. We should not be surprised that it is the Holy Spirit who is the source of these expressions of diversity. Just as the human body is both incredibly unified and amazingly diverse, so ideally is the body of Christ, which through this diversity expresses the completeness and richness of the body of Christ.

This image speaks directly to us as a church. In the past few decades, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has grown by leaps and bounds. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is composed of people from almost every conceivable background, culture, and environment. Our ethnic, racial, cultural, educational, and age differences must not be permitted to divide us in Christ. If anything, this diversity should be molded by the Holy Spirit as a force for unity, revealing the truth that despite these differences, we are all one in Christ.

As we have seen, at the foot of the cross we are all equal, regardless of who we are or where we come from. As the world around us becomes more and more fragmented, the church must demonstrate that unity in diversity is attainable. God’s people can demonstrate the healing and reconciling power of the gospel.

Amazingly, Paul tells us how this ideal can be accomplished. “Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body” (Eph. 5:23, NKJV). “And He is the head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18, NKJV). As each believer is spiritually connected to Christ, the entire body is therefore nourished with the same food. We cannot, then, over-emphasize the importance of the study of the Word of God, obedience to what we learn in the Word, and the common experiences of worship and prayer for unity in the body of Christ.

Sheep and Shepherd

Read John 10:1–11. What aspects of this metaphor of the church as a sheepfold speak of unity? See also Psalm 23.

In the modern world of large cities, it has become very rare to see animal husbandry of any kind. Most people now know little of the relationship between sheep and shepherds. However, when Jesus told this parable, people understood Him well. When He said, “I am the good shepherd,” they immediately recognized and appreciated His reference to Psalm 23:1, “The LORD is my shepherd.” The image was not only clear but also full of emotional value that made it vivid. In ancient Near Eastern culture, and still today in the Middle East, shepherds are known to be dedicated to the care of their sheep, regardless of the challenges. The figure of shepherd has become one of the dearest images used in Scripture to describe the character of God and His relationship to His people.

The image of God’s people as sheep is an interesting image. One impression we often have of sheep is their harmless and defenseless nature. Thus, they are dependent on a good shepherd for protection and guidance. They are, quite frankly, seen as stupid. Sometimes, inadvertently, sheep get lost, and the shepherd will seek them and bring them back to the fold. Young sheep often need to be carried and require extra care. Patience and understanding is needed to care for sheep. In many ways, this is a perfect image to represent the church. The church member has nothing to fear but everything to gain in a relationship with the Shepherd.

Jesus also emphasized in this parable the importance for the sheep to listen to the voice of the shepherd. When the conditions require it, it is possible to protect a few flocks of sheep by placing them in the same enclosure or sheepfold. How can they be separated later? All that is required is for the shepherd to stand at the door of the enclosure and call. His sheep will recognize his voice and come to him. “ ‘And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice’ ” (*John 10:4, NKJV*). Listening to the voice of the Shepherd is crucial for the church. In fact, the unity and safety of the people of God depend on their proximity to Him and are directly related to their submissive obedience to His voice.

People don’t generally like to be depicted as sheep. Nevertheless, why is that such an appropriate metaphor for us? What should this image tell us about our need of the Shepherd and our need to obey His voice?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “The Divine Shepherd,” pp. 476–484, in *The Desire of Ages*; “The Church on Earth,” pp. 240–243, in *Counsels for the Church*.

“In the context of the Temple in Jerusalem as well as the ubiquitous Greco-Roman structures, New Testament authors employ the temple metaphor to enable believers to visualize the sanctity of the church, God’s role in founding and growing the church, the defining nature of the work of Christ and the Spirit, and the solidarity of believers within the church. The architecture domain would seem to imply a static image. However, the metaphor is used in conjunction with biological imagery and the process of building is often accentuated. Rather than a static image, ‘we are impelled to visualize a story of the process of construction rather than a completed edifice.’ The church is granted the wondrous privilege of humbly acknowledging in its life and story ‘the temple of the living God’ (2 Cor. 6:16).” —John McVay, “Biblical Metaphors for the Church: Building Blocks for Ecclesiology,” in Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, ed., *Message, Mission, and Unity of the Church* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald®, 2013), p. 52.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Reflect on the biblical images of the church. Which one do you like most? Why are you more attracted to that one? Some other metaphors of the church can be found in these passages: 1 Tim. 3:15, 2 Tim. 2:3–5, 1 Pet. 2:9. What else do these metaphors teach about the church?
- 2 “God wants His people to be united in the closest bonds of Christian fellowship; confidence in our brethren is essential to the prosperity of the church; union of action is important in a religious crisis. One imprudent step, one careless action, may plunge the church into difficulties and trials from which it may not recover for years.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 446. What should this warning teach us about how careful we must seek to be in guarding the unity of the church? What role does each one of us have in this sacred responsibility?
- 3 Sunday’s study stressed that even as “the people of God,” we must rely only on God’s grace for salvation, and never on our own merits. In fact, couldn’t you even argue that it’s our very reliance on God’s merit for salvation that indeed makes us “the people of God”? Is this a valid claim? Why or why not?

Summary: The New Testament uses different metaphors to illustrate both the nature and mission of the church. More important, these metaphors teach that God is attentively watching over His people and protects them. These images also teach that God’s people are intricately linked with each other and that we need each other to do the work that we have been called to do.

The Book Smuggler

By VLADIMIR BORISOV*

After attending a pastors' conference in another country, friends asked me to take a box of 100 religious books back home. I wanted to help, but my country strictly controls the distribution of religious literature.

"I'll take the box of books only if the bus driver agrees to assume responsibility for it," I told my friends.

Bus drivers often agree to carry extra cargo in exchange for a cash payment, and my bus driver agreed to help for US\$100. A friend and I boarded the bus and settled in for the long ride.

Arriving at the border at night, the driver approached me for information about the box. He wanted to know how to speak with the border guards. When I told him that the box contained Christian books, he pulled the \$100 bill from his pocket and handed it back to me. "It's easier for me to smuggle cocaine than Christian books across the border," he said.

My friend and I had no choice. We knelt beside the bus and repacked the books into our suitcases. Then we prayed as we joined the line of passengers at the border crossing. The person ahead of us put his bags on the scanner belt and walked through customs. Then we put our suitcases on the belt. The border guard pressed the button to start the belt, but it didn't move. He pushed the button again. He pounded the button and swore. Still, the belt didn't move.

The border guard looked at us. "Fine, go," he said, motioning for us to take our suitcases from the belt.

Minutes later, my friend and I walked to the second border post to enter my home country. We put our suitcases on the belt, and the guard pressed the button. Nothing happened. He began to swear, and he finally turned to us. "Just go," he said.

Only after crossing the border did we dare look back. The guard had stopped the next person and was inspecting her bags manually. We thanked God as we sank into our bus seats.

On Sabbath, a church member had a strange story to tell. A voice had awakened her at night, saying, "Pray for your pastor." She hadn't known that I was traveling and thought that I was at home asleep. The voice came again, "Pray for your pastor." Finally, she knelt and prayed for an hour.

I asked when she had heard the voice. It was the exact hour that my friend and I had crossed the border.

Although I cannot name my country, please pray for God's work. Thank you for giving mission offerings to bring the message of salvation to many around the world.

**Note: Adventist Mission is not identifying the author by his real name or his whereabouts to safeguard his work.*

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Ephesians 2:19–22*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Explore selected biblical images of unity that demonstrate the integral role unity plays in the nature and mission of the church.

Feel: Appreciate the central role of the Godhead in the life and unity of the church.

Do: Value the contributions every member makes to the existence and mission of the church.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Unity and the Images of the Church

A How is the necessity of Christian unity emphasized by the images of the church, such as the people of God, the household of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ, and the sheep and Shepherd?

B What do we learn specifically about what unity looks like, and how unity occurs, through these images?

II. Feel: God and Church Unity

A In what ways does each member of the Godhead contribute to the unity of the church in the images studied in this lesson?

B Which of these contributions does your local church need the most?

III. Do: Every Member Important

A What do the images of church unity imply about the attitudes individual Christians need to have toward God and their fellow Christians?

B In what ways can you be more intentional in recognizing the value of every member of your church?

► **Summary:** Metaphors of the New Testament church illustrate the vital nature of dependence upon God and the harmonious relationships that God's people are called to have with one another.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *1 Corinthians 12:12*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Our relationship with God brings us into a unique relationship with other Christians. It impacts the way we see ourselves and one another as we are brought face-to-face with our common dependence upon God for all our needs and our common call to serve Him.

Just for Teachers: The story discussed below illustrates how a single relationship can alter other relationships. Help your class see the importance of the initial relationship and the role that a common mission plays in changing relationships between those involved with the mission.

Opening Discussion: When Wendy accepted a job at a hospital in a foreign country, she found herself surrounded by unfamiliar people in an unfamiliar culture. Her immediate coworkers hailed from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and adhered to an assortment of the world's major religions. At first glance, she had little in common with them. However, as she spent time with her new coworkers, she discovered that one had trained in her country. Another was an Orthodox Jew and, as such, respected the Sabbath. But it was not these common elements that impacted her relationships the most. It was their common relationship to the hospital that really brought them together. They were all overly tired from long hours on call. They all sat together doing paperwork and dictation late into the evening and attended the same conferences. They all rejoiced when long-term clients became well enough to go home, and they grieved when others died. Their common relationship to the hospital changed the way they related to one another so that within a few months they were socializing regularly outside of the hospital.

Discussion Questions: Describe one relationship that transformed the relationships you had with other people. What factors about the primary relationship made the difference in your other relationships? How might this help you to understand the ways in which your relationship with Jesus changes your relationship with others?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: The Bible contains a great many images of the

church. Five metaphors have been introduced in the Standard Edition lesson this week. This section explores three images that have been chosen to represent the relationships the church has with each member of the Godhead. As you examine each metaphor, try to understand how it portrays the unity God desires for His church, and, also, explore how the relevant Member of the Godhead is portrayed as contributing to that unity.

Bible Commentary

I. The People of God *(Review 1 Peter 2:9; Exodus 19:5, 6; and Leviticus 26:12.)*

The apostle Paul's identification of the church as the people of God connected the New Testament church with the history and promises of Israel. Jewish believers would immediately associate the phrase with their rich history of being a covenant people, for the term is, at its very core, a relational one. The emphasis of the term, however, is not on the people of God, but on the actions and character of God. It is God alone who has created this people. It is God who has chosen His people, and it is God who purchases, redeems, and saves His people. We are, therefore, God's possession and take our identity and direction from Him.

The term *people of God* highlights the privileged status we share because we have been set apart to serve a God who is just and merciful. As individuals and as a group of believers, we have experienced the grace of God. The metaphor of the people of God also thus emphasizes the shared aspects of our journey. Together we have been chosen and set apart, and we have experienced God's grace and favor. Together we share an identity rooted in Christ, and together we have a shared purpose to proclaim the wonders of our God. The metaphor, people of God, has the potential to unite us as we recognize our common failed past, our common privileged present, and our common future hope in Christ.

Consider This: Why does Peter emphasize the idea of becoming a people? What difference should our identity in God make to our everyday lives?

II. The Temple of the Holy Spirit *(Review 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17 with your class.)*

The metaphor of the church as a temple likely raised differing pictures in the minds of Paul's audience. Jewish believers would connect the church with Israel's history and the magnificent temple in Jerusalem that was central to Jewish religion and culture. Gentile believers outside of Palestine may have visualized pagan Greco-Roman temples,

such as that of Apollo. Nevertheless, Paul's point about the church as a temple would be understood by all. Ancient Near Eastern temples shared common features and symbolism. Temples were carefully constructed from the finest materials, for they were primarily a dwelling place for divinity. While God could not be contained in a building, the presence of His temple provided assurance that God, nevertheless, dwelt among His people as He had promised. Because God dwelt in the temple, the temple was both holy and a place of communication between God and His people. The presence of a temple also proclaimed the strength and power of God. It was an affirmation that God was interested and involved in the affairs of His people.

The church, like a temple, must be a fitting representative of the God that dwells within it. It is thus called to reflect His character. While each individual member is called to represent God, the reflection of God's character by the church, as a whole, provides a stronger witness to a watching world. Consequently, a united church demonstrates both the character and the power of God. Damage to the united demonstration of God's character destroys God's temple by impacting its use and function.

Consider This: How is God's presence visible in His church? Why is church unity so important for helping to reveal His presence?

III. The Body of Christ (*Review 1 Corinthians 12:12–26 with your class.*)

The metaphor of the body was used by some Greco-Roman politicians, such as Menenius Agrippa, to emphasize the unity of the state; so, Paul's inclusion of this metaphor to illustrate unity was not new. However, Paul's interpretation of the metaphor was very different from that of Menenius. The politician saw unity as occurring when the lower classes understood their place in the hierarchy and submitted to the rule of the ruling patricians. Paul, on the other hand, encouraged the church to honor the weaker and less visible members of the body, who were equally necessary for the function of the church. The diversity of the members of the church was to be embraced, for God Himself had arranged the various parts and roles. Of equal importance in Paul's illustration of the body is the interconnectedness of each part. Each part needs the other and, in turn, is affected by the success and failure of the others.

Consider This: Paul's view of the body clashed with the views of ancient politicians. How does the metaphor of the body continue to challenge the attitudes and values portrayed in society around us?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: All the metaphors of church unity studied in this lesson include a reference to a member of the Trinity. Help your class to understand the central role that our relationship to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit plays in bringing this unity to fruition.

Application Questions:

- ① The metaphor of the people of God calls us to recognize that our identity is in God. In what ways does our identity in God relate to unity? We often identify ourselves in other ways, such as nationality. What identities do you tend to reveal before you reveal to others your identity in God? Do these alternate identities or labels get in the way of unity in the church?
- ② How does viewing other people as members of the body of Christ impact the way you see and interact with them? How does this impact the way you see yourself and your own value?

Activity: Write a letter of appreciation for the gifts or service of a member of your church who usually doesn't get much recognition.

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: This activity reviews the principles found in the metaphors studied this week and applies them in a new way. It creates awareness of the importance of conveying the principles of Scripture in a way that can be easily understood in each culture and time period in history.

Activities: The New Testament authors used metaphors that were understood easily by their readers. Jewish listeners could visualize the temple and knew its importance and heritage. Likewise, most listeners were familiar with shepherds and their relationships with sheep. However, these ideas are more difficult for us to visualize today. Brainstorm possible twenty-first century metaphors of church unity that would be understood more readily in your own culture. Then choose one of these ideas to write a parable or tell a story to emphasize how the church should function.