

MY JOURNEY TO LIFE

UNITY

What is the meaning of unity in the body of Christ?

STEP 24 OF 28



My Journey to Life, Step 24

Foreword

My Journey to Life will give you the keys for finding peace of mind, harmony of body, and success in relationships. Every step will transform your outlook as you unpack each lesson. We pray they will help you to fall in love with the greatest Teacher this world has ever known. So together, let's walk the pathway step-by-step to a new life in Jesus.

Preface

Church members come from all different cultures and backgrounds, but not all differences need result in disunity. If the membership is centered on Christ and His cross, they will love each other just as Christ loves the church. This type of unity can only be achieved through the Spirit's gifts.

Step Twenty-four—Unity in the Body of Christ

What is the meaning of unity in the body of Christ? “The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich, and poor, male, and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation. Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures we share the same faith and hope and reach out in one witness to all. This unity has its source in the oneness of the triune God, who has adopted us as His children.”—*Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, p. 205

Bible Discovery: Psalm 133:1; Matthew 28:19, 20; John 17:20-23; Acts 17:26, 27; Romans 12:4, 5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-14; 2 Corinthians 5:16, 17; Galatians 3:27-29; Ephesians 2:13-16; 4:3-6, 11-16; Colossians 3:10-15.

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 239.2

1. As Jesus approached his death on the cross, what subject consumed Him? The night before Jesus' crucifixion, He gave His disciples a gripping example of humility and servant leadership by washing their dirty feet Himself at the Last Supper (see Step #25—The Lord's Supper). Notwithstanding all His efforts to promote unity among them, jealousy continued to drive their arguments over who was the greatest and who would be assigned the highest positions in the earthly kingdom they believed Jesus would establish.

Having finished His work on earth (John 17:4), Jesus continued to agonize over the disunity among His disciples, even on the evening before His death. Not only did they seek the highest place, but they were also filled with strong prejudices toward non-Jews, women, “sinners,” and

the poor, which blinded them to the inclusive love of Christ toward these ones. How Jesus longed for evidence that His disciples were unified, that they would “love one another” as He had loved them (John 15:12).

Bible Discovery: Matthew 12:25; 18:1-5; 20:25, 26; John 17:11, 21-26; Galatians 3:26-29

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 436.1; 437.2

2. How important is church unity? Jesus is the head of the body, which represents His church; therefore, unity is essential. Without unity the church would fail to accomplish its sacred mission of sharing the gospel with the world while representing God’s character of love, inclusion, and equality. Unity among believers of differing personalities, temperaments, and dispositions witnesses to the power of God’s Word to transform lives.

On the other hand, conflict, and disunity among professed Christians may be the greatest obstacle preventing unbelievers from accepting the Christian faith. True unity among believers defuses this obstacle. Jesus said, unity is major evidence to the world that He is a transforming Savior (John 17:23). The unified church is the panacea to a society divided by culture, gender, race, religion, politics, economics, class, caste, tribe, and nationality. As members grow closer to Christ, cultural differences are no longer divisive; instead, members recognize they are all equal and hold one another in respect and esteem. Christ is the yoke that binds members together.

Bible Discovery: Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 3:6; 4:15–16; 5:23; Colossians 1:18, 24

Further Reading: *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 731.1; *Selected Messages*, bk. 3, pp. 20.3-21.1

3. How is it possible to achieve the unity for which Jesus prayed? The Holy Spirit is the transforming agent behind church unity; He is the great unifier. Through Him all believers are led to the church to become a united movement, organized for service and witness. Such unity knows no hierarchy but develops into a dynamic movement of love. In Christ, Paul said, “the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:16, NIV).

Those whom the Spirit inhabits will focus on Jesus, not themselves. They will minimize their differences and unite in mission to glorify Jesus. Therefore, all of us who seek to be like Jesus can pray as He did for unity in the body of Christ. We can ask God to send the Spirit into our own hearts, that every vestige of self-seeking and prejudice can be swept away by His renewing power.

Bible Discovery: John 13:35; 17:23; 1 Corinthians 3:9; 12:13; Ephesians 4:3-6

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 179.1; *Selected Messages*, bk. 3, p. 20.3

4. What is the hope that the united church shares? The hope that is the center of the unified church is the appearing of Jesus to redeem His faithful people! The unifying mission of the church is to proclaim the good news of the “blessed hope” of salvation and help others prepare for Christ’s soon return.

Through a common faith—personal belief in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus—all become part of His body. The rite of baptism that symbolizes being buried with Christ and rising to new life in Him is the expression of the believer’s faith and willingness to unite with Christ’s body, His church. Thus, together as a movement organized for service and witness, believers diffuse their shared hope wherever the Spirit provides opportunity.

Bible Discovery: John 14:1-3; Romans 6:3-6; Ephesians 4:5; Titus 2:13; 1 John 3:3

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *Our High Calling*, p. 171.2

5. Does Biblical unity require uniformity? Christ’s church will be unified mission and action. This unity, however, does not imply uniformity. The church’s worldwide unity exists in diversity, illustrated by the body with many organs and functions, each vital, each different. God distributes His gifts “to each one individually as He wills” (1 Corinthians 12:11), creating a healthy diversity that benefits the congregation. Not only will the tasks be diversified in a congregation, but the thinking be different, even though all the members function under the direction of the same Spirit.

Jesus illustrates the concept of unity in diversity with a metaphor from nature (John 15:1-6). The grape vine illustrates the believer’s union with Himself. The branches symbolize the people of the church, who are extensions of the True Vine, Christ. Like every branch and leaf, each individual Christian differs from the others, yet a oneness exists, since all receive their nourishment from the same source, the Vine.

While remaining united on foundational Bible truths, we can nonetheless have sweet fellowship and harmony with one another without having the same interpretation of every Scripture!

Bible Discovery: Romans 15:5, 6; 1 Corinthians 1:10; 12:4-6; 13:11

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, Nov. 9, 1897, par. 13; *Life Sketches*, p. 321.2

6. What is the basis of the believer’s unity? The Holy Spirit unites the church through the Word of God. The Spirit works to fulfill Christ’s promise of a united church by guiding believers into all truth. Christ-centered truth then becomes the basis of unity. Love for Jesus and His written Word is the bond that keeps us together.

Though study of God’s Word, fellowship, exercising spiritual gifts and love are all important, their full meaning comes through the One who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). As the truth as it is in Jesus becomes our focus, it will eliminate all prejudice and friction. This process is not the work of a moment, but of a lifetime. We are continual learners

in the school of Christ. It is the Spirit who reveals to us our implicit biases and enables us to unite as heaven is united.

Bible Discovery: John 5:39; 8:31; 15:26; 16:13; 17:17; Acts 17:11

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 366.3; *Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 162.3-163.1

7. How does Christ's New Commandment relate to unity? Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34, NKJV). The "New Commandment" is love in action! The "New Commandment" results in doing good to others in acts of compassion and sharing, valuing others above oneself. Those living out the "New Commandment" would even be willing to lay down their life for another. As each member of the Godhead has love for the others, so will the members of the church love one another (Matthew 22:39) and bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2).

Here are two ways we can find the motivation to love as Jesus loves:

1. **Focus on Jesus' love demonstrated on Calvary.** Jesus didn't stand up for His "rights." Driven by love, Jesus allowed Himself to be falsely accused, mocked, derided, bruised, broken, and nailed to a cross (see Question 8).
2. **Pray for those who don't love you.** After all the humiliation, suffering and pain inflicted upon Him, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). As we pray for our enemies, God transforms our resentful, disunified hearts into new hearts, capable of carrying out Christ's New Commandment in His strength (Ezekiel 36:26).

Bible Discovery: John 15:12; Romans 12:9, 10; Philippians 2:3, 4; Hebrews 13:16; James 3:17; 1 John 3:16-18

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, 13LtMs, *Manuscript 160*, 1898, par. 23

8. In what ways does the cross of Christ enable unity? As we look to the cross—all that suffering, loving, dying—the divisions, factions, and infighting that may have consumed us fades. We long to love others as Jesus does and we recognize our complete inability to always show unselfishness without being rooted in the Vine.

At the cross, we realize Jesus did not die for us alone, but for every person on earth, regardless of race, nationality, color, caste, or belief system. Before we come to the cross, we may not see our conscious or unconscious bias and prejudice toward people groups unlike our own. The cross breaks through human blindness and puts God's price tag on human beings. The cross reminds us that Jesus would have died for our worst enemy. None are worthless; all are wanted. If Christ loves them, He will enable us to love them.

Jesus knew that His crucifixion would draw all to Him. If we respond to that magnetic power, it will empower us to see value in every individual and seek to help as many as possible. He bore

the sin burden for all humankind, which crushed out His life, so He could give us new life in Him. All division breaks down at the foot of Christ’s cross.

Bible Discovery: John 12:32; 15:5; Acts 17:26; Ephesians 2:13, 14; 5:1, 2; 1 John 4:9-11

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, May 18, 1888, par. 12

9. What are practical steps to unity? We find unity at the cross, through the Spirit, and in the Word. There are also proactive steps to growth in unity:

- **Practice unity in the home.** Through exercising wise management, kindness, gentleness, patience, and cross-inspired love at home, we are better able to carry these principles out in the church.
- **Aim for unity.** Pray for unity and carefully cultivate it by minimizing differences and avoiding arguing about nonessentials. Focus on the many truths that unite us.
- **Engage in social activity together.** As we fellowship with the church in shared meals, hikes, musical groups, workdays, and social gatherings, our bond with each other grows.
- **Work together in ministry.** All believers should unite in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, according to their spiritual gifts. Additionally, believers can serve harmoniously together in medical missionary work and societal or environmental advocacy for the communities in which they live, or beyond.
- **Develop a global perspective.** God’s work should be built up in all parts of the world—through offerings, prayer, mission trips, cultural awareness events, and avoiding partisanship and nationalism.
- **Be conscious of attitudes that divide.** James deplored another root of disunity—treating people differently based on wealth, status, and abilities. The Spirit will help us remember that Jesus is also represented in the person of the least of members. All are equally important to God.

Bible Discovery: Matthew 25:40; John 15:15; Acts 2:46; Galatians 5:16; James 2:9; 1 John 1:7; 4:9-11

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church*, vol. 5, p. 236.3

10. How can harmony be restored if there is evidence of disunity in the church?

For Seventh-day Adventists, if a member is actively promoting a concept that directly contradicts the Fundamental Beliefs established through prayer, biblical study, and the unction of the Spirit, that member should be counseled with loving concern. If the member nonetheless persists in promoting what contradicts biblical teaching, his or her actions should be brought to the local governing church body for appropriate discipline. This discipline should be characterized by Christ’s pity and forgiveness, remembering that just as we wish Christ to deal

with us, so must we deal with one another.

Bible Discovery: Matthew 18:15-18; John 17:17, 21; 1 Corinthians 2:2; 5:12, 13; 12:24, 25; 2 Corinthians 13:11

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, 6LtMs, Letter 29, 1889, par. 15-17; *Our High Calling*, p. 329.3; *General Conference Bulletin*, January 1, 1900, Art. A, par. 9

11. What does the Acts 15 story of the Jerusalem Council teach about unity in the church?

When the issue of circumcision threatened to divide the fledgling church, the leaders came together in Jerusalem to address the issue. Their Council demonstrates how leaders can process through disagreement. First, they considered the experience of the Spirit in anointing the Gentiles, just as He had the Jewish leaders. In his ecclesial authority, James cited Amos (Amos 9:11, 12), showing how the Spirit works through Scripture. James' counsel essentially encouraged the council not to put up unnecessary roadblocks for the Gentiles, but to keep requirements simple (Acts 15:18, 19). Regarding circumcision, they could perform this rite or not perform it. It was not to be mandated.

The consensus that came to the Jerusalem Council had a uniting influence on the apostolic church. Organization of the body of Christ has always been essential to see the work of the gospel carried out successfully and to avoid confusion and disorder. Christ-like order and discipline need not be enemies to spirituality!

Bible Discovery: Acts 15:1-29; 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2-6

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 200.2; *Review and Herald*, January 25, 1887, par. 9; *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 362.1

12. In what way might the Second Coming of Jesus be hastened through unity in the body of Christ, His church?

After Jesus' ascension, the disciples spent several days in the Upper Room waiting for the special gift of the Holy Spirit that would give power to their witness. They actively sought the Spirit through prayer as well as putting away all differences among them, seeking unity and reconciliation. As they came close together in Christ-like fellowship, the Spirit fell upon them with power, and three thousand were converted in one day (Acts 2:41).

Just before the coming of Jesus, the Spirit will again fall in even greater power on God's people as they humble their hearts in true repentance, confess their unbelief, and seek unity. This "refreshing from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19-21), will give power to their proclamation of the 3rd angel of Revelation 14. The gospel must first be preached throughout the whole world, and then Jesus can return.

Bible Discovery: Matthew 24:14; Acts 1:13, 14; 2:41; Ephesians 5:26, 27; Titus 2:14; 2 Peter 3:12; Revelation 18:1-4

Further Reading: Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 90.2; *Evangelism*, p. 696.2; *Selected Messages*, bk. 2, p. 374.2

Reflection...

As the end of time fast approaches, the church must press together and maintain harmony and unity. Amid the general discord of the world, let God's church be a place where harmony and unity still exist. This will occur when the Bible is our daily guide.

Next Step...

In the beginning, God entrusted Adam and Eve with a great responsibility: taking care of the new world, fresh from the hands of the Creator. This duty extends to us now, but in more ways than we might realize. Find out more in our next lesson.

Discussion Questions

1. What does "unity in diversity" mean to you?
2. Deep division exists today in many homes, communities, and nations. How can the church of God avoid the pitfall of schism?
3. What is your understanding of "one Lord, one faith, one baptism?" (Ephesians 4:5)

Further Reading

Official Adventist Website: <https://adventist.org/unity-in-the-body-of-christ>

Contact Information

Ellen G. White Estate: mail@whiteestate.org

Request a personal Bible study: <https://www.bibleschools.com/en/personal-studies>

Visit your local Seventh-day Adventist Church: <https://www.adventistlocator.org>

Online prayer room: <https://www.wepray.mobi>