

# *Bay Roberts Seventh-day Adventist Church*

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## **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.

Jesus, having finished His work on earth (John 17:4), continued to agonize over the condition of His disciples, even the evening before His death.

Jealousy led to arguments over who was the greatest and who would be assigned the highest positions in Christ's kingdom. Jesus' explanation that humility was the substance of His kingdom, and that true followers of His would be servants, willingly giving of themselves with no expectation of even thanks in return, seemed to have fallen on deaf ears (Luke 17:10). Even the example He set, stooping to wash their feet when none of them would do it because of the implications, seemed to have been in vain.

Jesus is Love. It was His sympathy that kept the masses following Him. Not understanding this unselfish love, His disciples were filled with strong prejudices toward non-Jews, women, "sinners," and the poor, which blinded them to the all-encompassing love of Christ even toward these detested ones. When the disciples found Him conversing with a Samaritan woman of ill-repute, they had not yet learned that the fields, ripe for harvest, include grain of all varieties, ready to be reaped.

But Christ could not be swayed by tradition, public opinion, or even family control. His irrepressible love reached down and restored broken humanity. Such love, which would set them apart from the careless public, would be the evidence of being true disciples. As He loved, they were to love. The world would forever be able to distinguish Christians—not because of their profession, but because of the revelation of Christ's love in them (cf. John 13:34,35).

So even in the garden of Gethsemane the main thing on Christ's mind was the unity of His church—those who had come "out of the world" (John 17:6). He pleaded with His Father for a unity in the church similar to that which the Godhead experienced. I pray "that they all [His followers] may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:21).

Such unity is the church's most powerful witnessing tool, for it gives evidence of Christ's unselfish love for humanity. Said He, "I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made

perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me'" (John 17:23).

## **Bible Unity and the Church**

What kind of unity did Christ have in mind for the visible church today? How is such love and unity possible? What is its foundation? What are its constituents? Does it demand uniformity or allow for diversity? How does unity function?

## **Unity of the Spirit**

The Holy Spirit is the moving force behind church unity. Through Him believers are led to the church. By Him they are "all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13). These baptized members are to have a unity Paul described as "the unity of the Spirit" (Eph. 4:3).

The apostle listed the basic components of the unity of the Spirit: "There is one body and one Spirit," he said, "just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph. 4:4-6). The sevenfold repetition of the word one emphasizes the complete unity Paul envisioned.

Calling them from every nationality and race, the Holy Spirit baptizes people into one body—the body of Christ, the church. As they grow into Christ cultural differences are no longer divisive. The Holy Spirit breaks down barriers between high and low, rich and poor, male and female. Realizing that in God's sight they are all equal, they hold one another in esteem.

This unity functions on the corporate level also. It means that local churches everywhere are equal, even though some are recipients of money and missionaries from other countries. Such a spiritual union knows no hierarchy. Nationals and missionaries are equal before God.

The united church has one hope—the "blessed hope" of salvation that will be realized at the "glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). This hope is a source of peace and joy, and provides a powerful motive for united witness (Matt. 24:14). It leads to transformation, for "everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:3).

It is through a common faith—personal faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ—that all become a part of the body. The one baptism that symbolizes Christ's death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-6) perfectly expresses this faith, witnessing of a union with Christ's body.

Finally, Scripture teaches that there is one Spirit, one Lord, and one God and Father. All aspects of church unity find their foundation in the oneness of the triune God. "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all" (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

## The Extent of Unity

Believers experience a unity of mind and judgment. Notice the following exhortations: "Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15:5,6).

"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). "Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you" (2 Cor. 13:11).

God's church, then, ought to reveal a unity of feeling, thought, and action. Does this mean that members should have identical feelings, thoughts, and actions? Does Biblical unity imply uniformity?

## Unity in Diversity

Biblical unity does not mean uniformity. The Biblical metaphor of the human body demonstrates that the church's unity exists in diversity.

The body has many organs, all contributing to the optimal performance of the body. Each fulfills a vital, though different, task; none are useless.

This same principle operates in the church. God distributes His gifts "to each one individually as He wills" (1 Cor. 12:11), creating a healthy diversity that benefits the congregation. Not all members think alike, nor are they qualified to perform the same work. All, however, function under the direction of the same Spirit, building up the church to the best of their God-given abilities.

To accomplish its mission, the church needs the contributions of all the gifts. Together, they provide a total evangelistic thrust. The success of the church does not depend on each member's being the same and doing the same as every other member; rather, it depends on all the members performing their God-assigned tasks.

In nature the vine with its branches provides an illustration of unity in diversity. Jesus used the metaphor of the vine to depict the believer's union with Himself (John 15:1-6). The branches, the believers, are the 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. The branches of the vine are individually separate and do not blend into each other: yet each branch will be in fellowship with the others if they are joined to the same parent stalk. They all receive nourishment from the same source: assimilating the same life-giving properties.

So Christian unity depends on the grafting of the members into Christ. From Him comes the power that vitalizes Christian life. He is the source of the talent and power necessary to accomplish the church's task. Being linked to Him shapes the tastes, habits, and lifestyles of all Christians. Through Him, all members are linked to one another, and joined in a common mission. As the members abide in Him, selfishness is driven away and Christian unity is established, enabling them to accomplish His mission.

So while there are different temperaments in the church, all work under one Head. While there are many gifts, there is but one Spirit. Though the gifts differ, there is harmonious action. "It is the same God who works all in all" (1 Cor. 12:6).

### **Unity of Faith**

Diversity of gifts does not mean a diversity of beliefs, however. In the last days God's church will be composed of a people who share a platform of the everlasting gospel—their lives characterized by the observance of the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus (Rev. 14:12). Together they proclaim to the world God's invitation to salvation.

### **How Important Is Church Unity?**

Unity is essential to the church. Without it the church will fail to accomplish its sacred mission.

### **Unity Makes the Church's Efforts Effective**

In a world torn apart by dissent and conflict, the love and unity among church members of different personalities, temperaments, and dispositions witnesses to the church's message more powerfully than anything else could. This unity provides incontrovertible evidence of their connection with heaven and of the validity of their credentials as disciples of Christ (John 13:35). It proves the power of God's Word.

Conflict between professed Christians has raised disgust in unbelievers and has been perhaps the greatest obstacle to their acceptance of the Christian faith. True unity among believers defuses this attitude. It is a major evidence to the world, Christ said, that He is their Saviour (John 17:23).

### **Unity Reveals the Reality of God's Kingdom**

A truly united church on earth reveals that its members are serious in their expectation of living together in heaven. Unity on earth demonstrates the reality of God's eternal kingdom. To those who live in this way the Scripture will be fulfilled, "How wonderful it is, how pleasant, for God's people to live together in harmony!" (Ps. 133.1, TEV).

### **Unity Shows the Strength of the Church**

Unity brings strength, disunity weakness. A church is truly prosperous and strong when its members are united with Christ and one another, working in harmony for the salvation of the world. Then and only then are they in the truest sense "God's fellow workers" (1 Cor. 3:9).

Christian unity challenges our increasingly disunited world, torn apart by loveless selfishness. The unified church exhibits the answer for a society divided by culture, race, sex, and nationality. A unified church will resist satanic attacks. Indeed, the powers of darkness are impotent against the church whose members love one another as Christ has loved them.

The positive and beautiful effect of a unified church can be compared with the performance of an orchestra. In the moments before the conductor appears, as the

musicians tune their instruments and warm up, they produce a cacophony. When the conductor appears, however, the chaotic noise stops, and all eyes focus on him. Every member of the orchestra sits poised, ready to perform as he directs. Following the conductor's leading, the orchestra produces beautiful, harmonious music.

"Unity in the body of Christ means blending the instrument of my life in the great orchestra of the called-out ones, under the baton of the divine Conductor. At His downbeat, following creation's original score, we have the privilege of performing for mankind the symphony of God's love."

### **The Achievement of Unity**

If the church is to experience unity, both the Godhead and believers must be involved in bringing it about. What is the source of unity and can it be obtained? What role do believers play?

### **The Source of Unity**

Scripture points out that unity finds its sources in (1) the keeping power of the Father (John 17:11), (2) the Father's glory that Christ gave to His followers (John 17:22), and (3) Christ's indwelling in the believers (John 17:23). The Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of Christ" in the midst of the body of Christ, is the cohesive power and presence that keeps each segment united.

Like the hub and spokes of a wheel, the closer church members (the spokes) come to Christ (the hub) the closer they come to each other. "The secret of true unity in the church and in the family is not diplomacy, not management, not a super-human effort to overcome difficulties—though there will be much of this to do—but union with Christ."

### **The Holy Spirit as Unifier**

As the "Spirit of Christ" and the "Spirit of truth," the Holy Spirit brings about unity.

#### **1. The Focus of unity.**

As the Spirit enters believers, He causes them to transcend human prejudices of culture, race, sex, color, nationality, and status (see Gal. 3:26-28). He accomplishes this by bringing Christ within the heart. Those whom He inhabits will focus on Jesus, not themselves. Their union with Christ establishes the bond of unity among themselves—the fruit of the indwelling Spirit. They will then minimize their differences and unite in mission to glorify Jesus.

#### **2. The role of the spiritual gifts in achieving unity.**

How attainable is the goal of church unity? When Christ began His mediatorial work at the side of His Father in heaven He made certain that the goal of having His people united was not an illusion. Through the Holy Spirit He gave special gifts particularly intended to establish "the unity of the faith" among believers.

In discussing these gifts, Paul said, Christ "gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers." These gifts were given to the church for the "equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of

Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-13).

These unique gifts are designed to develop the "unity of the Spirit" into a "unity of the faith" (Eph. 4:3,13) so that believers would be mature and firm and "no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Eph. 4:14, NIV).

Through these gifts believers speak the truth in love and grow up into Christ, the Head of the Church—developing a dynamic unity 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" (Eph. 4:16, NIV).

### 3. The basis for unity.

It is as the "'Spirit of truth'" (John 15:26) that the Holy Spirit works to fulfill Christ's promise. His task is to guide believers into all truth (John 16:13). Clearly, then, Christ-centered truth is the basis of unity.

The Spirit's mission is to guide believers into the "truth as it is in Jesus." Such a study has a unifying effect. Yet study alone is not sufficient to bring about true union. Only believing, living, and preaching the truth as it is in Jesus brings about true union. Fellowship, spiritual gifts, and love are all very important, but their fullness comes through the One who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Christ prayed, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17). To experience unity, believers, then, must receive the light as it shines from the Word.

As this truth as it is in Jesus dwells in the heart, it will refine, elevate, and purify the life, eliminating all prejudice and friction.

### Christ's New Commandment

Like man, the church was made in the image of God. As each member of the Godhead has love for the others so will the members of the church love one another. Christ has commanded believers to demonstrate their love to God by loving others as themselves (Matt. 22:39).

Jesus Himself carried the principle of love to the ultimate at Calvary. Just before His death He extended the injunction He had laid down earlier, giving His disciples a new commandment: "'Love one another as I have loved you'" (John 15:12; cf. 13:34). It was as though He was saying to them, "I'm asking you not to stand up for your rights, to see that you get your due, to sue if you don't. I'm asking you to bare your back to the whip, to turn your other cheek, to be falsely accused, mocked, derided, to be bruised, broken, nailed to a cross and buried, if it takes that to love others. For that is loving others as I love you."

### 1. The impossible possibility.

How can we love as Christ loved? Impossible! Christ asks the impossible, but He can accomplish the impossible. He promises, "'And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself'" (John 12:32). For unity in the body of Christ is incarnational, the unity of believers with God through the Word that became flesh. It is also relational, the

unity of believers through their common roots in the Vine. And finally, it is rooted in the cross: the love of Calvary dawning within believers.

## 2. Unity at the cross.

Church unity takes place at the cross. It is only as we realize that we cannot and do not love like Jesus that we admit our need of His abiding presence—and believe Him when He said: "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). At the cross we realize that He did not die just for us, but for every person on earth. This means He loves all nationalities, races, colors, and classes. He loves each equally whatever their differences may be. That's why unity is rooted in God. Man's narrow vision tends to separate people. The cross breaks through human blindness and puts God's price tag on human beings. It shows that none are worthless. All are wanted. If Christ loves them, so should we.

When Christ predicted that His crucifixion would draw all to Him, He meant that the magnetic drawing power of Himself, the greatest of sufferers, would bring unity to His body, the church. The vast gulf between heaven and us, the gulf that Christ crossed, makes the small step across the street or town we must take to reach a brother insignificant.

Calvary means, "Carry each other's burdens" (Gal. 6:2, NIV). He bore the entire burden of all mankind, which crushed out His life so that He could give us life and set us free to help each other.

## Steps to Unity

Unity does not come automatically. Believers must take steps to secure it.

### Unity in the home.

An ideal training ground for church unity is the home. If we learn wise management, kindness, gentleness, patience, and love with the cross as its center, at home, we will be able to carry these principles out in the church.

### Aim for unity.

We will never attain unity unless we conscientiously work for it. And we can never complacently consider ourselves to have attained. We must daily pray for unity and carefully cultivate it.

We should minimize differences and avoid arguing about nonessentials. Instead of focusing on what divides us, we should talk about the many precious truths on which we agree. Talk of unity and pray that Christ's prayer will be fulfilled. By doing so we can realize the unity and harmony God wants us to have.

### Work together toward a common goal.

The church will not experience unity until, acting as one unit, it is involved in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. Such a mission provides an ideal training for learning harmony. It teaches believers that they are all individual parts of God's mighty family and that the happiness of the whole depends upon the well-being of each believer.

In His ministry Christ melded together the restoration of the soul and the restoration of the body. And when He sent His disciples on their mission He insisted on a similar emphasis: preaching and healing (Luke 9:2; 10:9).

So, Christ's church must carry on both the work of preaching—the ministry of the word—and medical missionary work. Neither of these phases of God's work is to be carried out independently or become all-absorbing. As in Christ's day a balance, working together in harmony, should characterize our work for souls.

Those involved in the various phases of church work must cooperate closely if they wish to give the gospel invitation to the world in a powerful way. Some feel that unity implies consolidating for efficiency. However, the body metaphor indicates that each organ, large or small, is important. Cooperation—not rivalry—is God's plan for His worldwide work. Thus unity within the body of Christ becomes a demonstration of Christ's unselfish love so magnificently revealed at the cross.

### **Develop a global perspective.**

A church is not exhibiting true unity unless it is actively building up God's work in all parts of the earth. The church should do everything it can to avoid national, cultural, or regional isolationism. To achieve unity of judgment, purpose, and action believers of different nationalities must mingle and serve together.

The church must take care not to foster separate national interests, which would harm its united, worldwide thrust. Church leadership should operate in such a way as to preserve equality and unity, taking care not to develop programs of facilities in any one area that must be financed at the expense of building the work in other areas of the world.

### **Avoid attitudes that divide.**

Attitudes of selfishness, pride, self-confidence, self-sufficiency, superiority, prejudice, criticism, denunciation, and faultfinding among believers contribute to disunity in the church. Often a loss of the first love in the Christian experience lies behind these attitudes. A fresh look at God's gift in Christ at Calvary can renew love for one another (1 John 4:9-11). The grace of God mediated by the Holy Spirit can subdue these sources of disunity in the natural heart.

When one New Testament church developed the problem of disunity, Paul counseled the church to "walk in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16). Through constant prayer we are to seek the guidance of the Spirit, who will lead us into unity. Walking in the Spirit produces the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—which is an effective antidote to disunity (Ga. 5:22,23).

James spoke out against another root of disunity: basing how we treat individuals on their wealth or status. In strong terms he denounced such favoritism: "If you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors" (James 2:9). Because God is impartial (Acts 10:34), we should not give deference to some church members more than to others because of position, wealth, or abilities. We may respect them, but we ought not consider them more precious to our heavenly Father than the lowliest child of God. Christ's words correct our perspective:



"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40, NIV). He is represented in the person of the least, as well as in the most blessed of members. All are His children and hence equally important to Him.

Just as our Lord, the Son of man, became a brother to every son and daughter of Adam, so we His followers, are called to reach out in unity of mind and mission in a redemptive way to our brothers and sisters from "every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6).