

MANY, YET ONE FAMILY

by

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Theme: Through Christ we can find oneness in our families both at home and at church.

Theme Text: John 17: 1, 2, 6, 20-26

Hymn: *The Church Has One Foundation*

Presentation Notes: The notes presented in this section do not constitute a prepared sermon script. The following helps are designed to offer a framework, supportive resources, and illustrations toward the development of a sermon or sermons on the stated theme. You will want to shape these ideas in your own style, drawing upon your own study and experience to meet the particular needs of your congregation. Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses (1), (2), (3) will indicate illustrations, quotations and other material found in the *Sermon Illumination* section that may be helpful in your sermon development and delivery.

The last words spoken by individuals are often among the most poignant words they ever speak.⁽¹⁾ Families often stay close beside their friends and loved ones in their final moments and cherish their final words. The words of Jesus spoken in Gethsemane (John 17:1-26), in the final hours before His crucifixion, are poignant words.

He prays first for His disciples (John 17:11), then for Christians of all time (John 17:20-23). What recurring theme is found in this prayer? It is His desire for unity among His followers.

Why the Unity of His Followers Is Important to Jesus

The benefit to the Church. Surely there are benefits to be experienced among the believers from being in unity. It is encouraging to meet with fellow believers, individuals with whom you are close, people who think and feel and act in common accord with each other. It takes energy and effort to relate to people who are different from you, people who may be outside your comfort zone—older than you are, younger than you are, in a socially different circle from yours, with different temperaments, habits and customs, perhaps even with theological views that are different from your own. Many pastors report that members often drop out of church attendance because of the tension created by differences among members. The lack of harmony is unbearable for them. Sometimes disgruntled members say, "When the church gets united, then I'll be interested. But not until." So there are obvious *internal* benefits to unity.

The benefit to the world. But the benefits of unity to believers were not uppermost in the Saviour's mind in Gethsemane (John 17:21, 23). In his mind the reason oneness among His followers was so important had to do with whether or not His mission to earth would be validated, whether or not He would be believed and believed in. He was anxious that the world acknowledge that He really was who He said He was, not in an egocentric way, but because He

knew His mission to earth was the world's only hope.

To quote Jesus' prayer as recorded in *The Message Bible* by Eugene Peterson, the purpose of the believers' unity is to "give the godless world evidence that you've sent me and love them in the same way you've loved me." The oneness of believers bears testimony to the validity of the gospel. The oneness of believers is a living demonstration which confirms that Jesus is the Christ, the emissary sent of God to redeem this planet. The oneness of believers is evangelistic. The oneness of believers testifies of God's love. (The antecedent of the final "them" in John 17:23 is not completely clear. While Jesus has been praying about believers, the "you . . . have loved them" may include both God's love for believers and His love for the world.)

In commenting on the Savior's prayer for unity, Ellen G. White penned these arresting words:

It is our duty to study, daily and hourly, how we may answer the prayer of Christ, that His disciples may be one, as He and the Father are one. Precious lessons may be learned by keeping our Saviour's prayer before the mind, and by acting *our part* to fulfill His desire. (*Gospel Workers*, p. 447, emphasis supplied)

His Body—Our Oneness

We cannot unify ourselves. Before we consider the meaning of Ellen White's reference to "our part," we must saturate our minds with God's part. We must understand what God has done to bring about our unity. We cannot appreciate God's part until we face a hard reality—we cannot unify ourselves. As Jesus indicated to His disciples just a short while before His prayer in Gethsemane, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Our world church is growing in membership every day.(2) In addition to our evangelistic outreach and growth, concern for unity is uppermost in our minds as a church.(3) We want that unity among us for which Christ prayed. But we face constant challenges. Humanly, we cannot really unite ourselves. We can try very hard for uniformity in our official doctrinal statements, in our constitution and by-laws, in our forms of worship, in our Sabbath School Bible study guides, through making decisions together at one General Conference session each five years, etc. Yet similarity, or even uniformity if it could be achieved, is not the unity for which Christ prayed.

As a world church, as a local congregation, as individual households and families, we must find our unity *in Christ alone*.

United in Jesus. The issue of unity was a concern from the beginning of the Christian church. John 17 is a piece of the gospel of John, written toward the close of the first century. At that time, false theologies and practices swirled about within the Christian community. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, John recalled Jesus' prayer about unity and Jesus' teaching about the way that unity was centered in Himself.

- *A grapevine.* Jesus used a familiar illustration of a grapevine for His relationship with believers (John 15:5). The organic union in this and other growing plants makes it a fitting symbol of the unity of believers in Christ. It is an illustration well understood by farmers, horticulturists, botanists, gardeners, anyone who ever planted a seed and watched a plant grow.
- *A building.* The apostles Peter and Paul referred to the close connection between Christ and His followers as a building with many parts resting on Christ as the foundation (1 Peter 2:5; Eph. 2:20-22). Realtors, architects, masons, carpenters, builders, and anyone who ever lived in a house can have some appreciation for this symbol.
- *A body.* The most profound concept used in the New Testament to describe the unity of believers with Christ is the metaphor of the Church as a "body," of which Christ is the "head" (1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 1:22; 5:30; Col. 1:18). Every person can appreciate this illustration.

The Church as the Body of Christ

The Church was not formed by a group of believers sitting down and deciding to create a religious club or institution. Though it is made up of human beings, the Church, as the Bible conceives it, is not merely a human organism. The New Testament use of "body of Christ" to speak of Christ's people is not just a clever metaphor or symbol. Paul uses the illustration of the human body to describe characteristics of the Church, but the concept of the "body of Christ" is much more than an illustration. It is the expression of a divinely-determined reality.

[The Church is the visible presence of Christ on earth. Those who believe in Jesus constitute the Church; they make visible His invisible body. It is interesting that in the Bible people are not asked to "join the Church" per se. In biblical terms, the Church is not something one joins. The Church is the body of Christ, and people are called to accept Jesus as Savior and Lord and to accept our placement in that body.(4)

God puts us into Christ's body. "When Christ took human nature upon Him, He bound humanity to Himself by a tie of love that can never be broken by any power save the choice of man himself" (*Steps to Christ*, p. 72). This binding together of humanity with Jesus at His incarnation is very important. In God's eyes, the first Adam represents the old humanity. Jesus is the second or last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45) and represents a new humanity. Therefore, in God's plan of redemption, what Jesus does, the new humanity does. His choices are the choices of the new humanity. His doings are the doings of the new humanity. Where He goes, the new humanity goes. This is the basis on which Paul can affirm that humanity died on the cross with Him, was buried with Him, was raised with Him and is seated in heavenly places with Him (Eph. 2:5, 6; Col. 3:3).

Christ dwells bodily in heaven and believers are hidden with Him spiritually there (Col. 3:3). This truth is a part of a great spiritual reality. The other piece to that reality is that believers dwell bodily on earth and Christ is hidden among them here. His body is invisible, but becomes more and more visible as individuals respond to the good news, accept Him as their personal Savior, and are thus "added to the Church" (Acts 2:41, 47). It also becomes more visible as our unity speaks powerfully of His presence and transforming power in our midst.

Christ's part in our unity. All human beings, alienated from God, have been reconciled to God in Christ (2 Cor. 5:18). All human beings, alienated from one another through sin, have been brought together in Christ's body on the cross (Eph. 2:16). So God's part in the unifying of humanity has been accomplished in the person and work of Jesus. That is why Paul can say, "So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Rom. 12:5).

This is a profound truth for us to accept anew, to bask in, and, by God's grace, to live in. We are one body in Christ. Our unity is in Him. It is unthinkable that a living body could be divided. This is why Paul can ask the Corinthians, with all their factions and fractured fellowship, "Is Christ divided?" (1 Cor. 1:11-13).

Our Part

To these believers at Corinth Paul gave the most profound lessons about unity. A "body of Christ" motif pervades his letter to the Corinthian church.

Knowing we are members of the body of Christ guards us from sexual sin. Our bodies are members of Christ's body. We dare not disgrace Christ's body by the wrongful use of our own bodies (1 Cor. 6:15).

Knowing we are members of the body of Christ leads a group of believers toward becoming a well-organized, respectful, caring community. Taking as his illustration the

natural human body, Paul describes parallels in the body of Christ. "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is part of it" (1 Cor. 12:12, 27). Some specific insights from this passage include:

- *Individuality is important, but so is connectedness.* Individuality is not justification for separation from the body. We are not justified in saying of a fellow believer: "I'm not like him or her; I don't want to associate with him or her" (vss. 15, 16).
- *All parts function purposefully and compliment the functioning of all other parts.* If every part was alike, the complex organism of the body could not function. The design of the body is God's. We must recognize that each believer has been drawn to the body by God Himself. Each is vital to the health of the body. We need each other (vss. 17, 18, 19).
- *Each individual, even the weakest, contributes.* Each member deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. We need to sensitively recognize strengths and protect vulnerabilities of various members so that fairness and harmony prevail (vss. 21-25).
- *We are connected to each other.* The functioning and experience of one, whether positive or negative, affects the whole. Empathy and sympathy should pervade our relationships (vs. 26).(5)

The implication for Paul in this outstanding chapter of 1 Cor. 12 is that Christ, the same Creator who made the complex organism of the human body, has a plan to incorporate and utilize all believers in His spiritual body. Ultimately His plan is for the good of believers and the common good. We glorify Him when we cooperate with His design.

Other implications for life in the Body of Christ. Remember the quotation about doing our part to answer the prayer of Christ for unity (*Gospel Workers*, p.447)? Ellen White wrote that passage in the context of her discussion about the spirit that should prevail in church business meetings.

She had noticed one spirit in worship services and prayer meeting and another when the Church met to discuss practical issues and needs. As we mature in our love for one another and our unity in the body of Christ, some changes will undoubtedly take place among us:

- *Desire for improved communication.* We will have a greater desire to communicate clearly, to listen and understand one another rather than to argue or belabor our personal points of view.
- *Warmth and trust.* Our tendencies toward personal defensiveness will begin to melt away in the warmth of trust that we feel with fellow members of the body of Christ.
- *Humility.* Humility will replace desires to control and have our own way. Phil. 2:3, 4 will become our guideline: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."
- *Collaborative conflict resolution.* In our conflict resolution, we will work to resolve issues collaboratively in win-win kinds of ways.
- *Consensus decision-making.* In our decision-making, we will take fewer votes and work more for consensus.
- *A growth attitude toward differences.* We will take a positive attitude toward our differences, reframing them as opportunities for growth.(6)
- *Primacy of our personal union with Christ.* When there is the potential for discord with our brothers and sisters, we will recognize first our need to re-examine our personal union with Christ.
- *Unity in our families.* Life in the Church as the family of God has a reciprocal effect upon life in our households and homes. Our awareness of being part of the body of Christ influences life in our families. We recognize that all our relatives are precious to Jesus Christ. By His death on the cross He has brought us together with ties closer than those of flesh and blood.

Conclusion

The cause of division and discord in families and in the church is separation from Christ. To come near to Christ is to come near to one another. The secret of true unity in the church and in the family is not diplomacy, not management, not a superhuman effort to overcome difficulties—though there will be much of this to do—but union with Christ. The closer we come to Christ, the nearer we shall be to one another. (*Adventist Home*, p. 179)

Sermon Illumination

One (1): On February 26, 1993 terrorists detonated half a ton of explosives in the underground parking garage beneath the World Trade Center in New York City. Tragically, six lives were lost. It is a miracle that more were not. Thousands scrambled down the 110 stories of staircases when elevator power was cut off by the blast. Engineer Carl Selinger was alone in one elevator when it stalled. Thick smoke soon filled the elevator and Selinger thought he would die. In his pocket he found a pen and a little piece of paper. He began to write,

"To my family—from Dad. 12:40 p.m., smoky elevator 66, 2/26/93. A few thoughts if I am fated to leave you now—I love you very much. Be good people. Do wonderful things in your life. I'm so proud of my children—they're each so wonderful. Things I love and cherish: ideas, people, Cooper Union College, my work, my family, doing the best I could. Nothing more to say. Love, Dad (Carl Selinger—Bloomfield, N.J.)" (Dwyer, 1995, p. 205).

Carl Selinger was rescued, but when He was confronted with the reality that his life might be over, he was able to distill his most important thoughts into these few words.

Two (2): "In seconds, the numbers were: in 1995, every 47.8 seconds one person joined this church; in 1996, every 43.8 seconds; in 1997, every 42.3 seconds; in 1998, every 38.5 seconds; and in 1999, every 28.9 seconds. . . .

"Some people ask how are we doing against the population explosion rate. It will interest you to know that in 1995 there was one Seventh-day Adventist for every 647 people in the world. In 1996, one for every 621 persons in the world. In 1997, one for every 602 persons in the world. In 1998, one for every 583 persons in the world. In 1999, one Seventh-day Adventist for every 551 persons in the world.

"So under God, we are not doing too badly against the population explosion. Our world membership has now passed the 11 million mark, increasing from the 10,939,182 figure as of December 31, 1999" (Thompson, 2000, p. 8).

Three (3): "As we look forward, growth brings its own challenge. It's an enormous blessing. I mean this is why we are here. And yet it presents a major challenge as the church has to be very deliberate in its plans and that has to do with the church as its develops being able to stay together. Making sure that growth does not become a growth into fragmentation but a growth that is simultaneously a strengthening of all the elements that bring us together. So growth, the miracle, must be accompanied by corresponding attention to all the elements that hold us together" (Johnsson, 2000, p. 4).

Four (4): Ellen G. White notes the difference between being a member of the church and being united to Christ. "It is one thing to join the church, and quite another thing to be united to Christ. Unconsecrated, world-loving professors of religion are one of the most serious causes of

weakness in the church of Christ" (*Messages to Young People*, p. 357).

Five (5): "We differ so widely in disposition, habits, education, that our ways of looking at things vary. We judge differently. Our understanding of truth, our ideas in regard to the conduct of life, are not in all respects the same. There are no two whose experience is alike in every particular. The trials of one are not the trials of another. The duties that one finds light, are to another most difficult and perplexing" (*Gospel Workers*, p. 473).

Six (6): "Marked diversities of disposition and character frequently exist in the same family, for it is in the order of God that persons of varied temperament should associate together. When this is the case, each member of the household should sacredly regard the feelings and respect the right of the others. By this means mutual consideration and forbearance will be cultivated, prejudices will be softened, and rough points of character smoothed. Harmony may be secured, and the blending of the varied temperaments may be a benefit to each" (*Child Guidance*, p. 205).

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