

Unity *and* Broken Relationships



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Tim. 4:11, Philem. 1–25, 2 Cor. 10:12–15, Rom. 5:8–11, Eph. 4:26, Matt. 18:15–17.*

Memory Text: “For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (*Romans 5:10, NKJV*).

As we have seen, even after Pentecost the relationship between believers was at times strained. The New Testament records repeated examples of the way that church leaders and individual members dealt with such challenges. These principles are extremely valuable for the church today. They reveal the positive results that can come when we use biblical principles to deal with conflicts and preserve our oneness in Christ.

In this week's lesson, we will focus on restored relationships and how our human relationships impact our oneness in Christ. The ministry of the Holy Spirit involves bringing people closer to God and to one another. It includes breaking down the barriers in our relationship with God and breaking down barriers in our relationships with one another. In short, the greatest demonstration of the power of the gospel is not necessarily what the church says but how the church lives.

“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (*John 13:35, NKJV*). Without this love all our talk about church unity will come to nothing.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 8.

Restored Friendship

Paul and Barnabas worked together in witnessing for Jesus. But they had a disagreement over whether they could trust one as fearful as John Mark (*Acts 15:36–39*). The potential dangers of preaching the gospel had caused John Mark at one point to desert Paul and Barnabas and return home (*Acts 13:13*).

“This desertion caused Paul to judge Mark unfavorably, and even severely, for a time. Barnabas, on the other hand, was inclined to excuse him because of his inexperience. He felt anxious that Mark should not abandon the ministry, for he saw in him qualifications that would fit him to be a useful worker for Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 170.

Although God used all these men, the issues between them needed resolution. The apostle who preached grace needed to extend grace to a young preacher who had disappointed him. The apostle of forgiveness needed to forgive. John Mark grew in the affirming mentorship of Barnabas (*Acts 15:39*), and, eventually, Paul’s heart was apparently touched by the changes.

How do Paul’s letters to Timothy and the church at Colosse reveal his renewed relationship with John Mark and a new confidence in this young preacher? *Col. 4:10, 11; 2 Tim. 4:11*.

Although details of Paul’s reconciliation with John Mark may be sketchy, the biblical record is clear. John Mark became one of the apostle’s trusted companions. Paul highly recommended John Mark as a “fellow worker” to the church at Colosse. At the end of Paul’s life, he strongly encouraged Timothy to bring John Mark with him to Rome because he was “useful to me for ministry” (*2 Tim. 4:11, NKJV*). Paul’s ministry was enriched by the young preacher, whom he obviously had forgiven. The barrier between them had been broken down, and they were able to work together in the cause of the gospel. Whatever the issues between them, and however justified Paul might have believed himself to be in regard to his earlier attitude toward John Mark, it was all behind him now.

How can we learn to forgive those who have hurt or disappointed us? At the same time, why does forgiveness not always include a complete restoration of a previous relationship? Why does it not always need to?

From Slave to Son

While he was imprisoned in Rome, Paul met a runaway slave named Onesimus, who had fled from Colosse to Rome. Paul realized that he personally knew Onesimus's master. The Epistle to Philemon is Paul's personal appeal to his friend regarding a restored relationship with the runaway slave.

Relationships mattered to Paul. The apostle knew that fractured relationships are detrimental to spiritual growth and to church unity. Philemon was a church leader in Colosse. If he harbored bitterness toward Onesimus, it would color his Christian witness and the witness of the church to the nonbelieving community.

Read Philemon 1–25. What important principles about restored relationships can we find here? Remember, the key word is “principles.”

At first glance it is somewhat surprising that Paul did not speak more forcefully against the evils of slavery. But Paul's strategy was far more effective. The gospel, ideally, breaks down all class distinctions (*Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:10, 11*). The apostle sent Onesimus back to Philemon, not as a slave but as his son in Jesus and as Philemon's “beloved brother” in the Lord (*Philemon 16, NKJV*).

Paul knew that runaway slaves had a bleak future. They could be apprehended at any time. They were doomed to a life of destitution and poverty. But now, as Philemon's brother in Christ and willing worker, Onesimus could have a better future. His food, lodging, and job could be made secure under Philemon. The restoration of a broken relationship could make a dramatic difference in his life. He became a “faithful and beloved brother” and colaborer in the gospel with Paul (*Col. 4:9*). Paul was so fervent, so adamant, in his desire for reconciliation between them that he was willing to pay out of his own pocket any financial issues that might have arisen from what happened between the two believers in Jesus.

Drawing from the principles of the gospel as seen here, what can you take away that can help you deal with whatever stresses and strains, even fractures, you have in relationships with others? How can these principles prevent a breakdown in the unity of your local church?

Spiritual Gifts for Unity

As we saw in an earlier lesson, the church at Corinth had deep problems. What principles does Paul outline in 1 Corinthians 3:5–11, 12:1–11, and 2 Corinthians 10:12–15 for healing and restoration, which are so vital to church unity?

In these passages, the apostle outlines critical principles for church unity. He points out that Jesus uses different workers to accomplish different ministries in His church, even though each one is laboring together for the building up of God’s kingdom (*1 Cor. 3:9*).

God calls us to cooperation, not competition. Each believer is gifted by God to cooperate in ministering to the body of Christ and serving the community (*1 Cor. 12:11*). There are no greater or lesser gifts. All are necessary in Christ’s church (*1 Cor. 12:18–23*). Our God-given gifts are not for selfish display, and they are given by the Holy Spirit for service in the spreading of the gospel.

All comparisons with others are unwise, because they will make us feel either discouraged or arrogant. If we think that others are far “superior” to us, we will feel despondent when we compare ourselves to them and easily can get discouraged in whatever ministry we are in. On the other hand, if we think our labors for Christ are more effective than is the work of others, we will feel proud, which is the last sentiment any Christian should be harboring.

Both attitudes cripple our effectiveness for Christ and the fellowship we have with one another. As we labor within the sphere of influence that Christ has given us, we will find joy and contentment in our witness for Christ. Our labors will complement the efforts of other members, and the church of Christ will make giant strides for the kingdom.

Can you think of someone whose gifts in ministry have made you jealous? (Not too hard, is it?) At the same time, how often have you felt proud of your gifts in contrast to those of others? The point is that Paul’s concerns are an ever-present reality in fallen human beings. Regardless of the side on which we fall, how can we learn the unselfish attitudes that are necessary in order to maintain our oneness in Christ?

Forgiveness

What is forgiveness? Does forgiveness justify the behavior of someone who has horribly wronged us? Is my forgiveness dependent on the offender's repentance? What if the one with whom I am upset does not deserve my forgiveness?

How do the following passages help us to understand the biblical nature of forgiveness? *Rom. 5:8–11; Luke 23:31–34; 2 Cor. 5:20, 21; Eph. 4:26.*

Christ took the initiative in reconciling us to Himself. It is the “goodness of God [that] leads you to repentance” (*Rom. 2:4, NKJV*). In Christ we were reconciled to God while we were yet sinners. Our repentance and confession do not create reconciliation. Christ's death on the cross did; our part is to accept what was done for us.

It is true that we cannot receive the blessings of forgiveness until we confess our sins. This does not mean that our confession creates forgiveness in God's heart. Forgiveness was in His heart all the time. Confession, instead, enables us to receive it (*1 John 1:9*). Confession is vitally important, not because it changes God's attitude toward us, but because it changes our attitude toward Him. When we yield to the Holy Spirit's convicting power to repent and confess our sin, we are changed.

Forgiveness also is crucial for our own spiritual well-being. A failure to forgive someone who has wronged us, even if they do not deserve forgiveness, can hurt us more than it hurts them. If an individual has wronged you and the pain festers inside because you fail to forgive, you are allowing them to hurt you even more. Such feelings and hurt often are the cause of divisions and tensions in the church. Unresolved hurt between church members hurts the unity of the body of Christ.

Forgiveness is releasing another from our condemnation because Christ has released us from His condemnation. It does not justify another's behavior toward us. We can be reconciled to someone who has wronged us, because Christ reconciled us to Himself when we wronged Him. We can forgive because we are forgiven. We can love because we are loved. Forgiveness is a choice. We can choose to forgive in spite of the other person's actions or attitudes. This is the true spirit of Jesus.

How can focusing on the forgiveness we have in Christ help us learn to forgive others? Why is this forgiveness such an essential aspect of our Christian experience?

Restoration and Unity

Read Matthew 18:15–17. What three steps does Jesus give us to help us to resolve conflicts when we are wronged by another church member? How are we to apply these words in our contemporary situations?

Jesus' desire in giving the counsel of Matthew 18 is to keep interpersonal conflict within the church in as small a group as possible. His intent is that the two people involved solve the problem themselves. This is why Jesus declares, " 'If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone' " (*Matt. 18:15, NKJV*). As the number of people involved in a conflict between two individuals increases, the more contention can be created, and the more it can affect the fellowship of other believers. People take sides, and battle lines are drawn. But when Christians attempt to settle their differences privately, and in the spirit of Christian love and mutual understanding, a climate of reconciliation is created. The atmosphere is right for the Holy Spirit to work with them as they strive to resolve their differences.

Sometimes personal appeals for conflict resolution are ineffective. In these instances Jesus invites us to take one or two others with us. This second step in the reconciliation process always must follow the first step. The purpose is to bring people together, not drive them further apart. The one or two who join the offended party are not coming to prove his or her point or to join in blaming the other individual. They come in Christian love and compassion as counselors and prayer partners in order to participate in the process of bringing two estranged people together.

There are occasions when all attempts to solve the problem do not work. In this case, Jesus instructs us to bring the issue before the church. He certainly is not talking about interrupting the Sabbath morning worship service with an issue of personal conflict. The appropriate place to bring the issue, if the first two steps have not helped to reconcile the two parties, is the church board. Again, Christ's purpose is reconciliation. It is not to blame one party and exonerate the other.

"Do not suffer resentment to ripen into malice. Do not allow the wound to fester and break out in poisoned words, which taint the minds of those who hear. Do not allow bitter thoughts to continue to fill your mind and his. Go to your brother, and in humility and sincerity talk with him about the matter."—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 499.

Further Thought: Read the article “Forgiveness,” pp. 825, 826, in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*.

“When the laborers have an abiding Christ in their own souls, when all selfishness is dead, when there is no rivalry, no strife for the supremacy, when oneness exists, when they sanctify themselves, so that love for one another is seen and felt, then the showers of the grace of the Holy Spirit will just as surely come upon them as that God’s promise will never fail in one jot or tittle.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 175.

“If we stand in the great day of the Lord with Christ as our refuge, our high tower, we must put away all envy, all strife for the supremacy. We must utterly destroy the roots of these unholy things, that they may not again spring up into life. We must place ourselves wholly on the side of the Lord.”—Ellen G. White, *Last Day Events*, p. 190.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read Colossians 3:12–17. Discuss the Christian qualities the apostle Paul encourages the church at Colosse to seek. Why are these qualities the basis for all conflict resolution? How do they guide us in carrying out the principles that Jesus gives us in Matthew 18:15–18?
- 2 Look again at Colossians 3:12–17 and the teachings found in these verses. Why are these things so utterly essential for the unity in the church?
- 3 If we look at our church, that is, the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a whole, what is the greatest thing holding us back from the kind of unity that will be needed in order to reach the world? Is it our teachings and doctrines? Of course not. These are the very things that God has given us to proclaim to the world. Maybe the problem exists solely in us, in our interpersonal relationships, our petty jealousies, our bickering, our selfishness, our desire for supremacy, and a whole host of other things. Why must you plead for the power of the Holy Spirit to bring the changes that have to occur in you before we see unity in the whole church?

Summary: The gospel of Jesus Christ is about healing and transformation. And when these come, they cannot help impacting our relationship with others. The Bible gives us powerful principles and examples of how we can have good and close relationships with others, even in a world of sin.

Our Church Is Schools

By ANDREW McCHESNEY, Adventist Mission

Seventh-day Adventist education is the path to people's hearts in Bangladesh, church leaders said.

"Our church in Bangladesh is basically schools," said Milton Das, communication director for the Bangladesh Union Mission. "Education is the strongest medium to reach the people of Bangladesh. Where there is a church, there is a school."

That first mission station, which paved the way for Adventist education to blossom in the country, was founded in 1906 by Lal Gopal Mookerjee and his wife, U.S. schoolteacher Grace Kellogg, in then-East Bengal.

Today, Adventist schools are thriving centers of influence across this country of 162 million people, with some 10,000 students attending 174 village schools, 10 city schools, and nine boarding schools. About 60 to 70 percent of the students are non-Adventist, and the figure rises to 99 percent in city schools such as the Dhaka Adventist Pre-Seminary school, which teaches 1,535 students in the country's capital.

Adventist education is in high demand, with parents from various faiths wanting their children to learn Christian values, Das said.

"There are many more children waiting to go to school," said Das, who also oversees Bangladesh Children Sponsorship Services, a department of the Bangladesh Union Mission that covers the tuition costs of 3,000 underprivileged children a year through partnerships with the General Conference, Adventist supporting ministry Asian Aid, and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA).

Das himself received 16 years of Adventist education after an Australian woman paid his monthly tuition costs through Asian Aid. He said 90 percent of local church leaders were sponsored as children.

Shova Rani Bayen, 76, a retired schoolteacher, told of how she saw Adventist education change the lives of the Santali people living near Bangladesh's border with Myanmar. She said the people wore nothing more than scant cloths to cover their genitals and ate all living creatures—including snails, rats, cats, and dogs—when she first arrived in the area with her husband, evangelist Narottom Bayen, in the early 1960s. The adults had no desire to live differently. "But then we opened a church school," Bayen said. "Many of those children are now church workers, pastors, and evangelists."



MILTON DAS, far left, visiting an Adventist school in Dhaka, Bangladesh.