

The Holy Spirit *and the* Church



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 1:22, 23; 1 Cor. 12:13; Rom. 6:3–7; Acts 17:11; Eph. 4:5, 6; Acts 2:4–11.*

Memory Text: “Being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (*Ephesians 4:3–5, NASB*).

Sometimes we think of the Holy Spirit at work only on the individual level in the lives of individual believers. But this work in individuals is the foundation of a spiritual community. The Holy Spirit is ultimately responsible for the existence of the church of Christ.

We are often tempted to think that the church exists and grows because of our various evangelistic and missionary activities. Yes, God wants to achieve His glorious plans for the church, and to do so with our help. But the real reason for the church lies not in what we do; nor is it the result of our efficient organization and effective administration, however important these are. The church exists because of what God has already done and continues to do for us through the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who creates a spiritual community and fellowship that has the Written Word of God, inspired by the same Spirit, as its authority for faith and practice. The Spirit-inspired Bible is the foundation for the theological unity of the church. Without the work of the Spirit, the church would not exist and could not continue to fulfill its united mission.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 4.

The Holy Spirit Unites Us With Christ

The Holy Spirit unites us in manifold ways. We would not exist as a church if the Holy Spirit did not first unite us with Christ. Christ is the head of the church (*see Eph. 1:22, 23; 5:23*). Through the Holy Spirit, we are effectually united to Christ Himself. Being united with Christ is the foundation of all the blessings of salvation, because all we have in the Lord comes from Him. Our adoption as sons and daughters of Christ, our justification as well as our sanctification, our living a victorious life over sin, and our final glorification are all received through our union with Christ. Thus, He must be the foundation to our entire Christian experience.

Read Ephesians 2:18, 20–22, and 1 Peter 2:6, 7. What do they tell us about the role of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the creation of the church?

Through the Spirit, we have access to God the Father. Jesus is the Rock, the foundation of our salvation, and the One on whom all other parts of the whole building are erected.

The work of the Spirit on the individual level then leads to a specific community of faith: the church. When we have experienced salvation through faith in Christ Jesus alone, and have been touched by the love of God, there is a sweet “fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (*2 Cor. 13:14, NASB*) in the church. Individual believers are being built into a new spiritual house of God “in the Spirit” (*Eph. 2:22, NASB*). As followers of Christ we should be eager “to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (*Eph. 4:3, NASB*). In every way possible, without compromising what cannot be compromised, we need to seek for unity in the fellowship of believers.

Read Colossians 3:12–14. How can you exemplify these attributes and contribute to unity in the church? Why are these attributes so crucial to the unity of the church?

The Holy Spirit Unites Us Through Baptism

Read 1 Corinthians 12:13. How does baptism unite us with Christ and with the Spirit?

It is the Holy Spirit who unites us into one body of believers. The public entrance into Christ's spiritual kingdom is through baptism. We are baptized into a specific church body. Thus, baptism has a distinct communal dimension and important communal implications. As followers of Christ, we cannot live by ourselves. We all need the support, encouragement, and help of others. And we certainly cannot fulfill the divine mission alone. That is why God has created the church. To follow Christ means following Him in the fellowship of other believers. Thus, baptism and the church have a visible component to them.

Read Romans 6:3–7. What is symbolized through biblical baptism?

The act of being buried with Jesus Christ through baptism into death in the watery grave and being raised to new life in fellowship with Jesus, our Lord and Savior, represents the crucifixion of the old life and the public confession of accepting Christ as our Savior.

“Baptism is a most solemn renunciation of the world. Self is by profession dead to a life of sin. The waters cover the candidate, and in the presence of the whole heavenly universe the mutual pledge is made. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, man is laid in his watery grave, buried with Christ in baptism, and raised from the water to live the new life of loyalty to God.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1074.

Baptism is a positive step with which all who wish to be acknowledged as under the authority of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit must comply. In other words, baptism marks true repentance, the crucifixion of the old life, and it signals the new birth or conversion. It also encompasses mutual covenant obligations. The believer promises to be faithful to God and His commandments, and God guarantees that we can depend on His help whenever we need it.

Have you made a decision for believers' baptism? If not, what hinders you from following Christ in baptism? If you have been baptized by immersion, how has your baptismal covenant impacted your spiritual walk with Jesus?

The Holy Spirit Unites the Church Through the Word of God

Read Acts 17:11 and John 5:39, 46, 47; 8:31, 32. What is a distinguishing mark of a true disciple of Christ? Why is the Bible so indispensable in pointing us to Christ and in helping us to follow Him faithfully?

The primary means by which the Holy Spirit unites us with Christ is through the Written Word of God. The Bible is a trustworthy source for knowing Jesus and the will of God. That is why reading Scripture and memorizing its content is so important. The Bible is the authoritative source for discerning spiritual truth and error. Paul commended the Bereans as noble-minded (*Acts 17:11*) because they diligently studied and searched the Scriptures in order to find out if what they heard was true.

Any reformation and spiritual revival—no matter whether it affects us individually or as a church corporately—must be based on Scripture. The Bible is the foundation on which our faith is built; meanwhile, the love of Jesus and for His Written Word is the bond that keeps us together.

Read John 17:17–21. Here Jesus speaks about unity as a distinguishing mark of Christian discipleship. According to John 17:17, what is the basis for this unity?

The Word of God is truth (*John 17:17, Ps. 119:160*). The unity of the church is the work of the Spirit *with and through* the Written Word of God. The Holy Spirit will never lead us to doubt, criticize, go beyond, or fall short of Bible teaching. Instead, He makes us appreciate the divine authority of Scripture. The Holy Spirit never draws us away from the Written Word, any more than from the Living Word. Instead, He keeps us in constant, conscious, and willing submission to both. The Bible is the foundational source for any theological unity worldwide. Were we to lessen or weaken our implicit belief in the Bible as God's Word of truth to us, the unity of the church would be destroyed.

How much time do you spend in the Word? More important, how can you learn to submit to its teachings?

The Holy Spirit Unites the Church in Faith and Doctrine

“One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (*Eph. 4:5, 6*).

What is Paul telling us here about unity and where it comes from?

Unity in faith and doctrine is accomplished only in faithfulness to the Word of God. The Lord, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, forms a spiritual bond with every believer. The same new birth, generated by the Holy Spirit, the same obedience to the Word of God, enabled by the Holy Spirit, leads to a unity of faith and practice that transcends all human and cultural differences.

While we are called to submit to the Word of God and to do everything we can to maintain peace with everyone (*Rom. 12:18*), we ultimately cannot bring about theological unity or unity of purpose as a church body. For unity is not so much a work to be achieved but a gift of the Holy Spirit, who works on each believer individually and on the church corporately.

The theological foundation of this unity is the Word of God. Any appeal to the Spirit without the Written Word can lead to suspect doctrines and practices. At the same time, any appeal to the Written Word of God without the Holy Spirit dries up the Word and makes it barren. Because there is only one Lord, there is only one faith that leads to one baptism. Only in joyful faithfulness to the Word of God will we be able to see unity within our church. And if there is no unity in faith and doctrine, there will be no unity in mission.

“We have one Lord, one faith, one baptism. The gospel of Christ is to reach all classes, all nations, all tongues and people. The influence of the gospel is to unite in one great brotherhood. We have only one Model that we are to imitate in character building, and then we all shall have Christ’s mold; we shall be in perfect harmony; nationalities will blend in Jesus Christ, having the same mind, and the same judgment, speaking the same things, and with one mouth glorifying God.”—Ellen G. White, *Our High Calling*, p. 171.

Look at the Ellen G. White statement above. Not worrying about others and what others do, but only yourself, ask: *What can I do to help reach this wonderful goal of unity?*

The Holy Spirit Unites the Church in Mission and Service

Read Acts 2:4–11, 16–21. What was the result of the Holy Spirit’s being poured out on the New Testament believers?

The Holy Spirit was responsible for the most powerful missionary outreach that history had witnessed to that point. God can do more through a small group that is united in their devotion to Him than He can through a large group divided in their loyalties. But God can do even greater things when we all have devoted our lives and our energies, our talents and our resources, to Him.

Out of the unity in life and mission of the believers grew the New Testament church. A small and timid group of believers was changed into a powerful troop that became an effective tool that reached people from many different cultures and languages. They were united in proclaiming “the mighty deeds of God” (*Acts 2:11, NASB*). The same God who was active in New Testament times will continue to be active at the end of time, when the work needs to be finished before He comes again.

Read Acts 2:42–47. In what other things were the New Testament believers united?

The Pentecost mission enterprise was accompanied by a number of other factors where the early church stood united. They were united in Bible study and continually devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching (*Acts 2:42*). They were united in fellowship and the breaking of bread, possibly a reference to united worship (*Acts 2:42*). They were united in prayer (*Acts 2:42*) and in praising God (*Acts 2:47*). They were united in serving those in need when they freely shared what they possessed and had all things in common (*Acts 2:44, 45*). United Bible study and fellowship will result in the desire to share the good news with others and to help others in very practical ways. The Holy Spirit will open our eyes to the needs of those around us.

What activities in your local church help to reveal the unity of your church? What more could be done?

Further Thought: “This is the work in which we also are to be engaged. Instead of living in expectation of some special season of excitement, we are wisely to improve present opportunities, doing that which must be done in order that souls may be saved. Instead of exhausting the powers of our mind in speculations in regard to the times and seasons which the Lord has placed in His own power, and withheld from men, we are to yield ourselves to the control of the Holy Spirit, to do present duties, to give the bread of life, unadulterated with human opinions, to souls who are perishing for the truth.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 186.

“Every individual is striving to become a center of influence, and until God works for His people, they will not see that subordination to God is the only safety for any soul. His transforming grace upon human hearts will lead to unity that has not yet been realized, for all who are assimilated to Christ will be in harmony with one another. The Holy Spirit will create unity.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, pp. 20, 21.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What does Ellen G. White mean when she says that “every individual is striving to become a center of influence”? Why is that such a natural tendency of all of us, and what can we do to fight this tendency in our own lives? (See also *Phil. 2:3, 4*.)
- 2 Some argue that what will really unite us is service, not doctrine. In fact, they argue that doctrine tends to divide people; thus, it should not be made prominent. But why can’t there be unity in mission and service if there is division in doctrine? Why is a commonly shared faith a powerful factor for united and effective mission?
- 3 At the same time, how much room is there for theological differences? Few people are going to understand truth in the same way. How can we be united as a church while, at the same time, allowing for minor differences that will arise? How do people in your local church deal with differences in understanding and yet still maintain unity?
- 4 How can the Bible be an instrument that will bring unity? What attitude is needed in our study of the Word of God so that we can be united as a church in mission and in faith?