

Unity and Broken Relationships

“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” (Rom. 5:10, NKJV).



While shaking hands symbolizes a greeting or welcome between two people, it is especially significant when it occurs among enemies. It signifies that there is now an agreement, unity, or peace among those who were once at odds. While the handshake is a symbol of peace, the true transformation is in the heart.

Introduction

With Open Arms

Eph. 4:26

As we sat around the small café table discussing the Bible, sharing prayer requests, and talking about our lives, all I could think was, *I don't fit in here*. All of the other girls in my Bible study had been married for a long time, and most of them had kids. I was a newlywed to a man with a son, having no children of my own. All of the other women were in the same chapter of life, while I was in a younger, earlier phase.

I don't fit in here.

That night, I took the coward's way out: I composed a short email explaining that I felt like I didn't "fit in" with the other girls and that I would be stepping away from the Bible study. I didn't feel good sending it; I knew I should be brave and discuss my feelings with the group at large, giving them a chance to make changes and myself a chance to continue growing with them. However, my mouse clicked the Send button, and off my email went.

The next day, I received a somewhat defensive call from one of the women in the group. She wanted to work things out, wanted me to stay a part of the group, and wanted to find ways to make me feel included. She wanted to fight for our friendship. However, I had made up my mind. That phone call, coupled with the email, nearly ruined my relationships with the group members.

I wish I could say that shortly after, we all made amends and I happily rejoined the group.

It took six years for those relationships to be reconciled. Six years of awkward waves and tight smiles at church. Six years of forced small talk at social gatherings. Six years of tension and sadness brewing in my heart each time I thought about the group.

Then, out of the blue, I was invited to rejoin the Bible study. Some of the original members were gone, but the core group remained the same. With much trepidation, I attended my first meeting with them. I was welcomed back with open arms.

For six years, I had harbored ill feelings toward these women—who really had done nothing other than be different from me—and had imagined that they felt the same about me. Yet when I came back to the group, I found that this was not the case at all. Their reception of me was truly a demonstration of Christ's love and redemption.

Restoration is not only important for human relationships but also key for maintaining our oneness with Christ. Our lessons this week will focus on this important theme.

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2 Cor. 5:18–21

Evidence *Mutual Servants*

It is not rocket science that when two people are at odds, there needs to be a sense of mutual understanding and mutual change for healing to take place. There are always the proverbial “two sides to a story,” and for healing to occur it is necessary for both sides to be explored. Forgiveness may be the hardest standard that God puts before us because it is contrary to human nature to administer mercy instead of punishment when undisputed, purposeful wrong has been committed. Yet “reconciliation” is not only suggested but presented as an absolute for those who are followers of Jesus.

There are always the proverbial “two sides to a story.”

The word *reconcile* comes from a compound Greek word meaning “to change mutually,” a clear indicator of what God requires in our personal conflicts. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:18–21 that the followers of Jesus are His ambassadors who have been given the “ministry” and the “message” of reconciliation. The word *ministry* in the Greek indicates the physical attendance of a servant, while the word *message* reflects a verbal exchange. As we serve Jesus as ambassadors of His kingdom, it is necessary that we are willing to see controversies through the eyes of those to whom we minister, and when conflicts arise, we continue with both the words and actions of the Most High King whom we represent. Though the Word of God is never to be compromised, there are situations in which mutual change is not only preferred but actually mandatory for unity to exist.

With this meaning of the word *reconcile* in mind, how do we apply Paul’s explanation that in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself (verse 18)? We see that all humanity needs to change in order to be united with God, but can we expect “mutual change” from the King of the universe who boldly states, “I the LORD do not change” (Mal. 3:6, NIV)? This is not a “reconciliation” of equals or a conflict between brothers or sisters. The reconciliation suggested here is between the Most Powerful and the most powerless. Can God be a part of such mutual change?

The answer becomes apparent as Paul emphasizes the change that God chose to make in order to facilitate reconciliation: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21, ESV).

Jesus has already made the greatest change of all—and awaits the mutuality of human response. What does Jesus’ change teach us about reconciliation in our own lives?

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DECEMBER 3

Logos *Reconciliation, Forgiveness, and Unity*

Genesis 3;
Matt. 5:23, 24;
18:15–17, 21–35;
Acts 13:13; 15:36–39;
Rom. 5:8–11;
1 Cor. 3:5–11; 12:1–11;
2 Cor. 5:18–20; 10:12–15;
Eph. 4:11–16;
Col. 4:10, 11;
2 Tim. 4:11;
2 Pet. 3:9

Fractured Friends (Genesis 3)

One consequence of the sin of Adam and Eve was fractured relationships and casting blame. Eve blamed the serpent for her disobedience. Adam blamed Eve and ultimately God when he said, “The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate” (Gen. 3:12, NKJV). Ever since, men and women have looked for someone else to blame for their shortcomings, and our personal relationships have suffered. It was only God who did not cast blame—rather, taking the blame in the symbol of the sacrifice that was the shadow of the ultimate sacrifice of His Son, Jesus (verse 21).

How can we take responsibility for our own actions, reconcile these broken relationships, and embrace real unity with our brother and sister sinners? Consider applying the principles that follow.

He took the first step.

Reconciliation With Jesus Leads to Reconciliation With People (2 Cor. 5:18–20)

In order to find reconciliation with brothers and sisters who have wronged us—and whom we have wronged—we must first find our personal reconciliation with Jesus. Because we are innately selfish individuals, we, by nature, do not play well with others. This “me-ness” causes us to seek our own desires, regardless of what others need. We treat God the same way. We want what we want. It is only when we confess this as sin to Jesus and allow Him to cleanse us from this selfishness that we can be free to treat others in the way God has treated us. Second Corinthians 5:18–20 tells us that God, through Christ, has reconciled us to Himself—which enables us to pass along the ministry of reconciliation to others. It is impossible for two hearts that are filled with the love of Christ to allow division and bitterness to stain their relationship. We can live beyond that, not because we are able but because Jesus makes us able.

Forgiveness Is Not Optional (Matt. 5:23, 24; 18:15–17, 21–35; Rom. 5:8–11)

One key component to reconciliation is forgiveness. Forgiveness is very hard. I’m not talking about forgiving someone because they left the toilet seat up or down. I’m talking about the forgiveness that is needed because of betrayal or cruelty—the deep, heart-crushing actions that rock our souls. Jesus describes the process of forgiveness in Matthew 5:23, 24 and Matthew 18:15–17. One of the first ideas that jumps out is that you, personally, have the responsibility to start the process of seeking forgiveness—no matter who

was wrong and wronged. Paul reveals to us that this is the way God acted: “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8, NKJV). He took the first step. When we realize how great the debt that He has forgiven us, we are freed to be able to forgive one another. Jesus reveals that forgiveness is not optional in the parable of the generous, forgiving king and the unforgiving servant—also in Matthew 18.

Everyone Deserves a Second Chance (Acts 13:13; 15:36–39; Col. 4:10, 11; 2 Tim. 4:11; 2 Peter 3:9)

Where would we be if God did not believe in second chances? Second Peter 3:9 tells us that God is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (NKJV). Therefore, He gives us erring humans a second chance—or a third chance—or a fourth chance. In the book of Acts we read that Paul gave up on the young, discouraged missionary Mark, who abandoned Paul and Barnabas on one of their mission trips. Paul's distrust of Mark led him to separate ministry from Barnabas's when Barnabas insisted Mark go on the subsequent mission trip. However, in the last days of Paul's life, as he was suffering in prison, he sought Mark's companionship and asked Timothy to “get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry” (2 Tim. 4:11, NKJV). Mark got a second chance. You did too. Someone in your life may need one from you.

What Reconciliation Does Not Mean (1 Cor. 3:5–11; 12:1–11; 2 Cor. 10:12–15; Eph. 4:11–16)

Reconciliation does not mean we will always agree with each other. It does not mean we'll always do things the same way. We are one in Jesus, but He made us all as unique individuals with different gifts. True unity is achieved in spite of those differences. Unity does not mean uniformity. Paul talks about the different gifts that God has put in the church. He likens the church to a body. There are different body parts, but they all form the one body. Just so in the church, we all have different gifts but are to use those differences to make the body of Christ function at peak efficiency to bring the ministry of reconciliation to the world. It is when a person starts insisting that his or her job is more important or when someone insists that their way of thinking is the only way to believe that the unity of the body is threatened. Here's an old saying that may help us as we move from reconciliation to unity: In essentials—unity; in nonessentials—liberty; in *all* things—charity (love).

REACT

1. How does one know whether he or she has truly forgiven someone?
2. Is there someone in your life whom you need to give another chance? Think of a name.
3. What do we do when we disagree over what constitutes essential and nonessential points of faith?

Testimony

You and Me: Unity Through Forgiveness

Matt. 18:15

It is important for us to remember that we are all human beings, and we all *have* and *will* fall short of the glory of God. Matthew 18:15 has an important insight on how to deal with those circumstances, when we see a friend—Christian or not—display a demeanor that is not conducive to what is right or moral. We, as followers of Christ, should not gossip and tell others about their actions. We should, instead, go to the source of the concern and address the issue; after all, the fastest way to kill a weed is by destroying the root.

“Christian unity is a mighty agency.”

According to Ellen White, when someone acts in the opposite way from the guideline laid out in Matthew 18, “injustice is done because of an unwillingness on the part of someone to follow the directions given by the Lord Jesus.”¹

She also says, “He in whose heart Christ abides recognizes Christ abiding in the heart of his brother. Christ never wars against Christ. Christ never exerts an influence against Christ. Christians are to do their work, whatever it may be, in the unity of the Spirit, for the perfecting of the whole body.”²

When we do not follow Christ’s instructions to handle a situation in which there is division, we are essentially declaring war on ourselves. However, when we lovingly approach others whom we are at odds with, we are able to work together toward reconciliation.

“Christian unity is a mighty agency. It tells in a powerful manner that those who possess it are children of God. It has an irresistible influence upon the world, showing that man in his humanity may be a partaker of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. We are to be one with our fellow men and with Christ, and in Christ one with God. Then of us can be spoken the words, ‘Ye are complete in Him.’”³

REACT

1. Have you ever had a fellow believer discuss a difficult issue (or gossip) with someone other than you? Have you ever discussed someone’s issues with someone other than the person involved?
2. In what ways do you need to grow so that you can emulate the ideas of forgiveness and unity, and thus be a light to the world?

1. Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 498.

2. Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, p. 277.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 276.

Matt. 18:15–17;
2 Cor. 5:20, 21;
Philem. 1–25

How-to *Trust: The Key Ingredient in Unity*

My online accounts have passwords, and I don't write them down anywhere. I lock my doors. I have identity-theft insurance. I am convinced that if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. We spend time and money to protect ourselves because of our suspicions regarding the intentions and motives of others. We try to protect our property, our reputations, our well-being, and our emotions because we have learned that there are untrustworthy people.

Trust is the foundation of any positive interpersonal interaction.

In order for a relationship to grow and thrive, there must be trust. Trust is the foundation of any positive interpersonal interaction. When it comes to the body of Christ, we will move closer to God only if we trust Him, and we will develop unity among fellow believers only if we trust one another. “Whether you define trust as mutual confidence or loyalty or ethical behavior, or whether you deal with its fruits of empowerment and teamwork and synergy, trust is the ultimate root and source of our influence.”¹

Here are a few steps to develop trust among the followers of Christ:

Be a trustworthy person. Jesus went about doing good and did so with pure motives (Acts 10:38). We must be people of integrity, desire the best interests of those around us, follow the golden rule (Matt. 7:12), and even be willing to sacrifice our personal benefit for a greater good (1 Cor. 6:1–8).

Seek reconciliation when relationships are strained. Misunderstandings, miscommunications, and stresses on trust are an inescapable part of life. In Matthew 18:15–17, Jesus outlined the steps we are to take when we are faced with the inevitable obstacles to trust. Throughout the process, Jesus emphasized restoring the relationship.

Trust wisely. We are not called to blind trust or to unhealthy suspicion. God told us there will, unfortunately, be untrustworthy people, even professed Christians. “Test all things, hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21, NKJV).

Trust God. Believe that God will cause all things to work together for good (Rom. 8:28). When we trust that God will bring about what is best for us (Dan. 3:16–18) and that He has promised us eternal life, taking the risk to trust brings little to lose and much to gain.

1. Stephen M. R. Covey, with Rebecca R. Merrill, *The Speed of Trust* (New York: Free Press, 2008), p. xxiv.

Opinion

No Longer an Enemy

Rom. 5:8–11

When you think of the word *enemy*, what comes to your mind? Maybe you think of a villain from one of your most-read books, or perhaps you think of a sinister movie character. Perhaps you even think of your favorite superhero in their superhero garb, fighting evil and saving the day. In these instances, it's generally easy to divide the "good guys" from the "bad guys."

Have you ever had an enemy?

Here's a harder question: have you ever had an enemy? Perhaps it was someone who used to be a friend and no longer is because of a falling out. In real life, it is frequently less simplistic to divide the good and bad—there's much more gray area in the real world.

Now, here's the hardest question: have you ever considered yourself to be the enemy? And, more seriously, have you ever considered yourself God's enemy? If you read Romans 5:8–11, you'll see that each of us was considered God's enemy before the death of Jesus. However, because of Jesus' death on the cross, we are reconciled with God. First John 3 takes it even further, saying that because of the love of the Father, we are called His children.

I don't know about you, but I don't like to think about being God's enemy. It makes me feel uncomfortable and a bit hopeless. However, it also makes me feel incredibly thankful for the gift of salvation and reconciliation that Jesus gave me when He died. I did nothing to deserve the gift Jesus gave me, yet He did it anyway.

Similarly, each one of us in the family of God has been given the same gift of reconciliation. None of us is better than the next guy, because each of us has received the same gift. With this in mind, one might ask why we end up fighting among ourselves, holding grudges, and breaking out of the oneness that God desires so much for His church. All of these conflicts are so menial when we consider the things of Heaven!

How should the concept of being reconciled to God change our lives? I submit that it should change everything for us. If we are on God's "side" now—the ultimate "good guy"—we should be sharing the good news of that gift with everyone. No longer are we doomed to enemy status, but we—each one of us separately, as well as a whole—are part of God's family now.

REACT

Who is someone whom I consider an enemy? Is there anyone who views me as an enemy? How can I change my interactions with them to better reflect my reconciliation with my Father?

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Luke 23:31–34;
2 Cor. 5:20, 21;
Eph. 4:26

Exploration

No Time Like the Present!

CONCLUDE

A key theme laced through our lessons this week is reconciliation. We have been reminded of the importance of being reconciled to each other because it impacts our oneness in Christ. We have also been reminded of our place in God's family as a result of His love and compassion. After all, He gave the greatest gift—His Son—for us so that we could be reconciled to Him. However, what if you are lacking resolution in an area (or even more than one area) of your life? There is no time like the present to address the issues and move forward toward unity in Christ!

CONSIDER

- Writing a letter or email to someone with whom you're at odds. Be sure to honestly share your perspective without coming across as "attacking." Try to set up a time to meet in person so that you can work together toward resolution.
- Painting a picture that uses color to depict the feeling of division between yourself and someone else. Share this with your Sabbath School class or Bible study group.
- Reflecting on your interactions with someone else to help understand an unreconciled situation. Do your best to see things not only from your perspective but from theirs as well.
- Collaborating on a project with someone with whom you're at odds. Working toward a common goal can help you work toward reconciliation in your own situation.
- Comparing and contrasting your views with another person's views. Make a journal entry to document these ideas.
- Looking for a Bible verse that gives you direction for your unresolved situation. Write the verse on a three-by-five-inch card and set it where you will see it frequently. If possible, memorize it.
- Offering up yourself to the Lord as a tool to be used in someone else's unreconciled situation. It can be difficult to get involved in someone else's issue without prying, but sometimes a third party is helpful in mediating and working toward resolution.

CONNECT

1 Corinthians 1:10–17; Ephesians 4:11–16.

Bonita Joyner Shields, *Touch Points: Forgiveness Takes One; Reconciliation Takes Two* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald®, 2006).

Lourdes Morales-Gudmundsson, *I Forgive You, but . . .* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press®, 2006).

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