

December 31
Lesson 5 (NIV)

FAITH TO UNITE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 68:1-6, 15-20, 32-35

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 4

EPHESIANS 4:1-16

¹ As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

⁷ But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ This is why it says:

“When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people.”

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(What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) ¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴ Then we will 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 people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

KEY VERSE

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.—[Ephesians 4:1-3](#)

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Discuss the significance of unity to the identity and mission of the church.
2. Explain why appreciation of the diversity of individual gifts is critical to unity in the church.
3. Identify and use his or her spiritual gifts to advance the church's mission.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. A House Divided
- B. Lesson Background

I. Reason for Unity ([EPHESIANS 4:1-6](#))

- A. Worthy of the Calling ([vv. 1-3](#))
- B. Nature of Our Faith ([vv. 4-6](#))

United We Stand, Proudly We Fall

II. Means to Attain Unity ([EPHESIANS 4:7-11](#))

- A. Through Differences ([vv. 7-10](#))
- B. Through Leadership ([v. 11](#))

III. Results of Unity ([EPHESIANS 4:12-16](#))

- A. Mature to Serve ([vv. 12, 13](#))
What's on Your List of Sins?
- B. Grounded to Stand ([v. 14](#))
- C. Truthful to Love ([vv. 15, 16](#))

Conclusion

- A. Growth and Health
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. A House Divided

Abraham Lincoln's statement that "a house divided against itself cannot stand" remains one of the most famous quotes from American political history. But how many Americans today realize that Lincoln was quoting Jesus ([Matthew 12:25](#); [Mark 3:25](#))?

Jesus' statement was in response to accusations that he himself cast out demons by the power of Satan. But it would make no sense for the devil to empower Jesus to cast demons out of people. Satan's house would be divided against itself.

In today's passage, Paul applies a similar logic to the mission of the church: it would make no sense for God's people to divide themselves and work against one another, especially in view of the fact that Christ is working in each of us individually to accomplish his purposes. No house, no kingdom, and no church can stand if its people do not work together.

B. Lesson Background

Ephesus was one of the most significant centers of first-century Christianity. With many thousands of residents and serving as a shipping hub for the Lycus River Valley and the Aegean Sea, Ephesus was one of the largest and richest cities in the Roman world. The city's magnificent temple to its patron goddess, Artemis, was revered as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and was a major tourist attraction. As a cosmopolitan commercial and religious center, Ephesus was widely known for its religious diversity: Jews lived side-by-side with pagans of all stripes, and occult practices and their accompanying superstitions were prevalent (see [Acts 19](#)).

Small wonder that the apostle Paul chose Ephesus as a base for evangelistic efforts in western Asia Minor. He spent almost three years in the city ([Acts 19:8-10](#); [20:31](#)) preaching to Jews and Gentiles and sending his own disciples to plant churches in nearby cities like Colossae and Laodicea. [Acts 19](#) and [20](#) are dedicated largely to the history of the founding of the church in Ephesus. Unable to visit personally (see first verse of the lesson), Paul wrote.

Even though the Ephesian Christians enjoyed strong apostolic leadership, they struggled to live faithfully in a world driven by possessions, pride, and false conceptions of God and his will. In [Acts 20](#), some three years before Ephesians was written, Paul warned the elders of the Ephesian church that self-serving leaders would create factions, splitting the body to serve their own purposes.

I. Reason for Unity

(EPHESIANS 4:1-6)

A. Worthy of the Calling (vv. 1-3)**¹ As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.**

The word *then* marks an important transition in Ephesians. As a *prisoner for the Lord* under arrest in Rome, Paul has time on his hands—so he writes letters. To this point in this letter, he has been addressing profound concepts relating to adoption as God’s chosen children (Ephesians 1:4-14), the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the plan of salvation (2:11-22), and his own calling as an apostle (3:1-13).

Building on these themes, the apostle turns to the practical implications of one’s calling in Christ: God expects his chosen people to use what he has given them to work together in advancing the mission of the church.

² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.**HOW TO SAY IT**

Aegean A-*jee*-un.
 Artemis Ar-*teh*-miss.
 Colosse Ko-*lahss*-ee.
 Colossians Kuh-*losh*-unz.
 Corinthians Ko-*rin*-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).
 Ephesians Ee-*fee*-zhunz.
 Ephesus Ef-*uh*-sus.
 Gentiles Jen-*tiles*.
 Laodicea Lay-*odd*-uh-*see*-uh.
 Philemon Fih-*lee*-mun or Fye-*lee*-mun.
 Philippians Fih-*lip*-ee-unz.
 Tychicus Tick-*ih*-cuss.

This verse defines what it means to live a life worthy of God’s calling as it emphasizes virtues that promote unity. To be *humble* is to recognize that everything we have comes from God. Such humility in turn influences how we treat others. Character traits of gentleness, patience, and forbearance are to replace traits of harshness, tendencies to quarrel, and impatience. We as God’s adopted children are to imitate our heavenly Father in loving one another.

³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

The Holy Spirit, working in each person, produces a spirit of unity within the church. Absence of unity, therefore, means that some are not following the Spirit’s lead. Galatians 5:22-25, Paul’s famous discussion of the “fruit of the Spirit,” also characterizes the Holy Spirit as producing qualities in us that tend to *unity*, as opposed to the sinful desires of the flesh that selfishly divide us (5:19-21).

Paul’s reference to *the bond of peace* may play on his reference to himself as the Lord’s “prisoner” in verse 1: like the chains that bind a convict, the Spirit ties believers together in a web of peace.

What Do You Think?

How might the characteristics listed in verse 2 reveal themselves as we work in unity?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Examples of things said and not said
- Examples of things done and not done
- Examples of nonverbal body language

B. Nature of Our Faith (vv. 4-6)**⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;**

The verse begins the recitation of Paul’s famous “seven ones,” which he uses to illustrate the vital nature of unity among Christians. *One body* draws on the human body as a metaphor for the church, which Paul elsewhere characterizes as “the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). In this analogy, the parts of the body, each with its own unique function, represent individual Christians with their varied spiritual gifts. While the heart cannot do what the lungs can do and vice versa, both are absolutely vital to life. And so it is in the church.

With the reference to *one Spirit*, Paul begins to use the unity of God as an analogy for the kind of unity he expects to see in the church. Also, this verse with the next two present one of the few places in the Bible that address what later becomes known as the doctrine of the Trinity. God the Father, God the Son (Christ), and God the Holy Spirit are distinct in their work yet fully united in their purpose. Since God is one and since there is only one God, there is no room for Christians, as God’s children, to divide from one another.

One hope relates the principle of unity to our salvation. We fulfill our hope of Heaven as we unite and work together.

⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism;

The New Testament authors often use *Lord* in reference to Christ. There is only one Christ and only one true *faith* in him that provides salvation. As Paul reminds the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1:11-17), no one is baptized in the name of a Christian leader; all believers of all personality types, ages, races, and gifts experience the same baptism reflecting the same faith in the same Christ that takes us to the same Heaven. This being true, how can we not be united in our work?

What Do You Think?

What reminders of common ground in Jesus have helped you defuse conflict?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Concerning silent reminders to ourselves

Concerning audible or visible reminders to ourselves

Concerning reminders to others

6. one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Although God the Father is in some sense distinct from Christ, they are completely united as one, and there is only *one God*. That God is *over all* as Creator and Ruler, and that he is *through all* in the sense that he is everywhere and sustains everything, cannot be disputed. It therefore must be true that God is working in all of us individually to bring us together for a common purpose.

UNITED WE STAND, PRIDEFULLY WE FALL

El Chapo was his nickname. It means “Shorty,” but Joaquín Guzmán Loera stood tall in the world of drug trafficking. He was Mexico’s drug kingpin. His organization smuggled tons of drugs through tunnels dug under the border between the U.S. and Mexico.

In 2001, friends helped *El Chapo* escape from prison. He was recaptured in 2014 and sent to a maximum-security prison. He escaped again a year later. The escape route was a tunnel accessed through a hole in the floor of his cell’s shower. The notorious criminal organization embarrassed the Mexican government with the sophisticated escape.

Pride led to *El Chapo*’s re-capture, however: word of his whereabouts leaked out when he was trying to arrange a deal for a movie of his life story. The organizational unity that had led to “success” in *El Chapo*’s illegal activities was thereby undone.

The church has the noblest of missions: making disciples ([Matthew 28:19, 20](#)). But evil people like *El Chapo* aren’t the only ones whose pride causes stumbling. When *our* way becomes more important than *Christ’s* way, the world will be sure to see it.

—C. R. B.

II. Means to Attain Unity

([EPHESIANS 4:7-11](#))

A. Through Differences ([vv. 7-10](#))

7. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

Grace is used here in a more nuanced fashion than in earlier chapters. In the contexts of [Ephesians 1:6](#) and [2:5-8](#), *grace* refers to God’s unmerited favor and love—a love so strong that it called unworthy people to be children and heirs. Here *grace* still refers to God’s favor, but with a focus on what he does after we are saved: Christ shows favor by granting each of us gifts and abilities that can be used to serve the church.

Each one of us emphasizes that no one is left out. God views all spiritual gifts, and all the people who have them, as equally important to the work of the church. It is therefore critical that they/we all work together to get the job done.

What Do You Think?

How should awareness of the source of spiritual gifts affect how we relate to one another?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Through prayer

Through service

Through speech patterns

8. This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.”

This is a loose quotation of [Psalm 68:18](#), cited here in support of the fact that Christ, the one who *ascended on high*, is the source of our gifts. In the psalm, God the conquering king takes his enemies as captives and receives tribute (*gifts*) from them as spoils of war. Paul is apparently drawing on an ancient reading of the psalm that proposes that God is not receiving gifts but giving them to his people—gifts plundered from his enemies (the original Hebrew of the psalm can be interpreted in either sense).

The phrase *he took many captives* is difficult. Some students think it refers to believers who have been captured from sin’s clutches ([2 Corinthians 2:14](#)); others propose it refers to spiritual enemies ([Colossians 2:15](#)).

9. 10. (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)

Paul views the psalm as a prophecy of Christ. The Jesus who was powerful enough to ascend *higher than all the heavens* ([Acts 1:9-11](#)) and was willing to make himself of “no reputation” ([Philippians 2:7](#)) in descending to the lower, earthly regions in human form is certainly able and willing to gift us to serve his church!

B. Through Leadership ([v. 11](#))

11. So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,

Paul has just stressed that Christ has graciously given gifts, and we normally think of these spiritual gifts as abilities that individual Christians receive to fulfill a particular service or calling. By analogy with [1 Corinthians 12:4-11](#) and [Romans 12:6-8](#), one might conclude that each believer “owns” a gift that God has given him or her—as in, “this ability is mine to use for God.” Such a posture readily lends itself to a sense of pride in one’s accomplishments.

Here, however, the gifts are not abilities and talents that individuals have received, but rather are people whom God has put into the church to accomplish its mission. These people, exercising their God-given talents, belong to the church as essential equipment. This being the case, Christ must have intended for all these

individuals (all of us) to work together toward one unified purpose.

All types of service are important, and Paul lists several service positions that illustrate the diversity of abilities with which Christ endows us. *Apostles* is likely used in the narrow sense of those who, like Peter and Paul, witnessed the resurrected Christ personally; thus they are authorities on Jesus' teachings.

Prophets are empowered not only to predict the future (foretelling) but also to speak God's truth (forthtelling); the latter is similar to the role of the modern preacher. At the risk of oversimplification, *evangelists* can be viewed as comparable with modern missionaries (see [Acts 21:8](#)).

The verse before us is the only place in the New Testament where the word *pastors* occurs. The Greek word behind it is elsewhere translated "shepherd (s)" (example: [Matthew 9:36](#)). Their function is to provide pastoral care. Some students see the phrase *pastors and teachers* as designating one kind of gifted person: a "pastor-teacher."

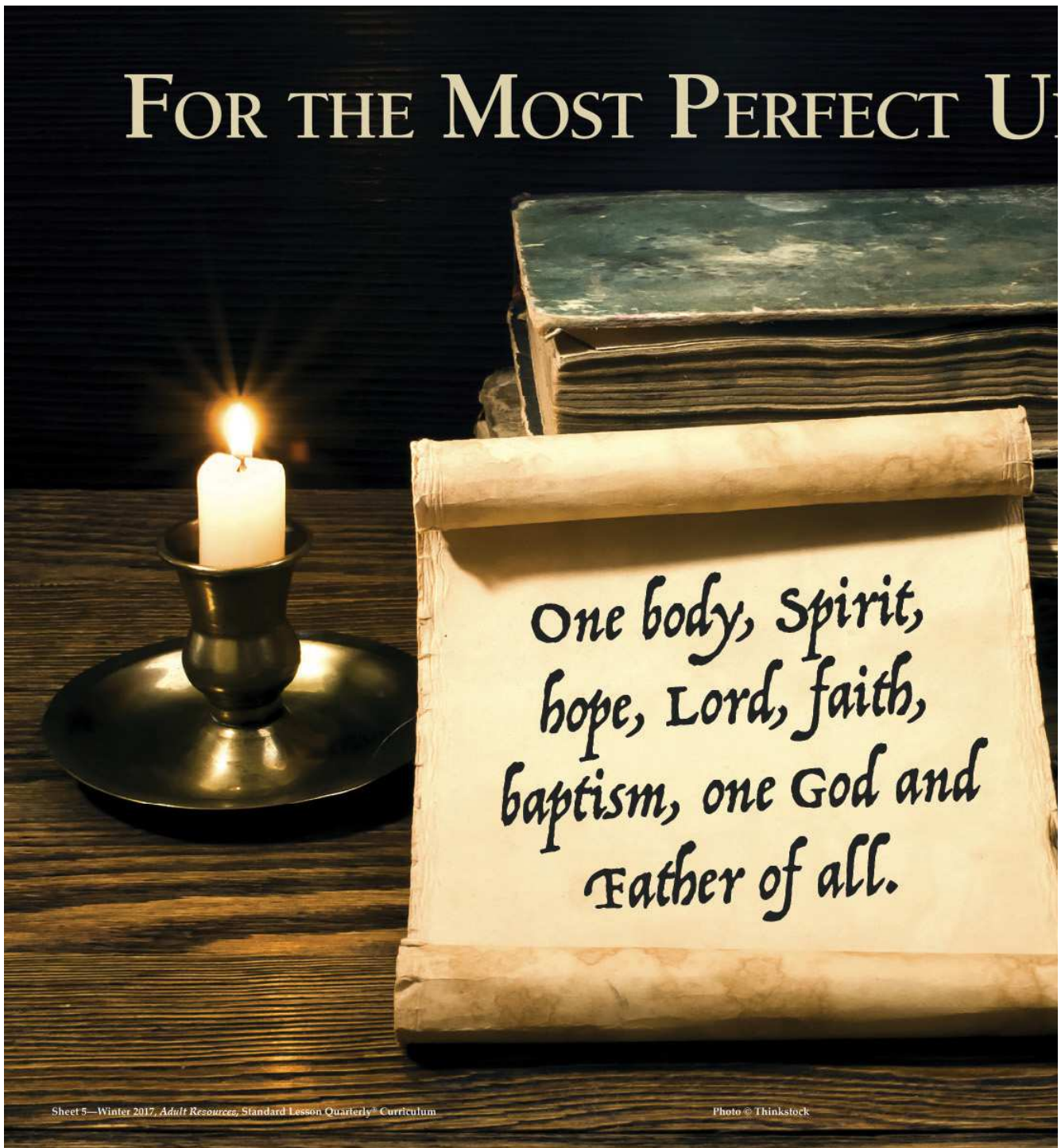
III. Results of Unity

(EPHESIANS 4:12-16)

A. Mature to Serve (vv. 12, 13)

¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

The opening phrase of this verse indicates the purpose, or intended result, of Christ's act of giving the individuals of [verse 11](#) to the church. Paul mentions what Christ intended for individual believers as well as what he intended for the church as a whole in this giving. When God's gifted people work together for the common good, individual believers become better equipped to serve. As we each grow, the church as a whole is built up and made stronger, better able to fulfill its purpose of reaching a lost world. It should go without saying that Christ did not give us gifts to serve ourselves or to divide us from others.



Sheet 5—Winter 2017, *Adult Resources, Standard Lesson Quarterly® Curriculum*

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Visual for Lesson 5. Start a discussion by pointing to one entry on the list as you ask, "What if we lacked this one but had the other six?"

What Do You Think?

What are some appropriate ways to respond after being blessed by another's faithful use of spiritual gifts?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In private discussion with him or her
- In public

¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

The mature believer, and churches composed of mature believers, will be characterized by unity, knowledge of Christ, and imitation of Christ. *Unity in the faith* likely refers not to saving faith in Christ but rather to the established orthodox truth of the gospel (compare [1 Timothy 1:19, 20; 3:9; 4:1, 6; 6:20, 21; 2 Timothy 4:7](#);

Jude 3). Paul does not suggest that unity comes at the expense of truth, but rather that commitment to the truth will lead to unity. The Greek noun translated *knowledge* occurs more than a dozen times in Paul's writings, frequently in contexts of comprehending something about God (**Romans 1:28; 10:2; Ephesians 1:17; Colossians 1:9**). What could be more important than studying to gain an ever-better *knowledge of the Son of God*?

Such knowledge reaches its pinnacle when we achieve *the fullness of Christ*. We move toward that goal as we put away our own desires in order better to think and act as Jesus did. Attaining Christ's fullness will include every aspect of what we today call discipleship: knowing who Jesus was and what he did and taught as we try to live daily by his teachings and example. Even though we can never perfectly achieve this in this life, it remains the goal of those on the path to spiritual maturity.

WHAT'S ON YOUR LIST OF SINS?

Tom was a 50-something elder in his church, and he was rather pleased with his maturity in the faith. One Sunday, a visiting preacher spoke at the church, and Tom and his wife invited him over for dinner. The visit was pleasant until Tom began to complain about the spiritual immaturity of many church members, compared with the high level of Tom's own spiritual achievement.

Tom asserted that he had reached the point of no longer sinning. The standard of judgment he used was a list of practices that were not a part of his lifestyle. It included adultery, gambling, the use of alcohol and tobacco, etc. Missing from the list were sins of the heart: a critical spirit, a divisive attitude, etc. Tom's approach to spiritual maturity was to glory in the vices he *didn't* practice rather than the virtues that *did* characterize his life.

Paul's exhortation focuses on love that builds each other up rather than on man-made rules that eventually tear the church apart. Paul was not soft on sin, but he knew that a prideful spirit was just as un-Christlike as the habits of the flesh Tom was so pleased to say he had outgrown. (Well, Tom did acknowledge that he would *occasionally* make a "mistake"!) Do a lack of love and the absence of a unifying spirit make it onto our list of sins as we seek maturity in Christ?

—C. R. B.

B. Grounded to Stand (v. 14)

14. Then we will 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 people in their deceitful scheming.

Paul sometimes compares the church with a human who is (or should be) growing in intellectual and emotional maturity from life as a child into adulthood. In the most famous of these maturing passages, **1 Corinthians 13**, Paul says that the mature church composed of mature believers will be characterized by love and full knowledge of God. Regarding the passage at hand, Paul extends the reference to "knowledge" in **verse 13** to stress that the mature church will be doctrinally sound. Such a church is able to discern falsehood and protect itself from those who seek to divide. When the church is united as all its individual parts work together, it will be much more difficult for self-seeking people to promote their own agendas.

The metaphor of a boat tossed by the waves and wind—analogue to the child who cannot discern truth from falsehood—illustrates the dangers of immaturity and divisiveness. Unity in truth is the proper anchor for the church and its message.

C. Truthful to Love (vv. 15, 16)

15, 16. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Paul again stresses that unity comes through truth, not at the expense of truth. The focus here is clearly on how believers within the church interact with one another. Those who are mature will converse truthfully, guided by a spirit of love that unites. Such love neither gives nor takes offense when the truth is spoken.

Continuing with the analogy of the church as a human body, Christ as *the head* is the center of thought, reason, and motivation (see **Colossians 1:15-20**). The mature church will be united in purpose and guided by Christ. Each member of the church may be compared with a *ligament*. Just as each ligament, joint, and muscle in the human body fulfills a distinct function, each Christian is gifted by the Spirit to fulfill a distinct calling. When this happens—as each individual part matures and develops—the entire body becomes mature and strong. The result is, again, love, so that unity is both the driver of the church's growth and the goal of its growth.

What Do You Think?

What are some practical ways to keep truth and love balanced in our interactions?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Identifying times when truth is expressed in unloving ways

Identifying times when love is expressed in such a way that truth is eclipsed

Conclusion

A. Growth and Health

Parents know of many trips to the pediatrician during the first two years of life. Doctors pay close attention to the age when a child begins to stand, to take her first steps, and to speak. While each person is different, growth statistics are important because they are primary indicators of a child's health. Similarly, farmers measure the quality of soil and seed by crop yields. Whether plants, animals, or people, growth is a sign of health.

Paul would say that the same is true of the church. As we grow as individuals, the church collectively grows in maturity and numbers. When we find that we and/or our church isn't growing, it may be time for a spiritual checkup to determine whether something is amiss.

B. Prayer

Lord, we fall prey to pride at times. Help us appreciate one another and work together to fulfill the work of Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

“United we stand, divided we fall.”

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Play a group game such as Charades, in which team members must communicate well and work together in order to succeed. After a few rounds, lead into Bible study, saying, “They say there is no *I* in *team*. The best teams work because they are unified in reaching for a shared goal. Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus about that type of unity. Let’s see what he had to say.”

Into the Word

Divide the class into three groups. Supply each group with pen and paper and one of the following research assignments on handouts you create. They will read portions of today’s text and compare them with parallel portions of Scripture. Partial suggested responses are in italics; do not include those on handouts.

Group 1—Reason for Unity

1. What characteristics of our lifestyle demonstrate that we seek the unity worthy of the name “Christian”? Compare [Ephesians 4:1-3](#); [Philippians 1:27](#); [2:1-4](#).
We show we are one in Jesus by showing that the humble nature of Jesus rules us.
2. How does unity among believers demonstrate key truths of our faith? Compare [Ephesians 4:4-6](#) and [John 17:20-23](#).
We share one faith because we worship the one and only God. When we are one, we show that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one and that Jesus was sent by God.

Group 2—Means of Attaining Unity

1. What is the difference between expectations of unity and expectations of uniformity in the church? Compare [Ephesians 4:7-10](#); [Romans 12:6a](#); [1 Corinthians 12:11](#).
Christian unity is not achieved by being the same, but by allowing God to make us different!
2. What role does leadership play in attaining unity? Compare [Ephesians 4:11](#); [Romans 12:6b-8](#).
Those differing gifts allow us both to serve one another and to lead one another in our shared faith.

Group 3—Results of Unity

1. How does unity fight evil? Compare [Ephesians 4:12-14](#); [Romans 12:21](#).
When we are taught the truth, we are no longer divided by the evil one. Knowing what is right and good overcomes that which is evil.
2. Why is love crucial for Christian unity? Compare [Ephesians 4:15, 16](#); [1 Corinthians 12:27-31](#); [13:13](#).
Love builds us up. It is what unifies all of God’s gifts, making love the greatest gift of all.

Allow groups to report after they have completed their research.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Circles of Unity” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work individually or in small groups. Allow them to share their findings.

Into Life

Invite students to give examples of times when they’ve seen unity among Christians. In contrast, have them list times when they have seen a lack of unity among believers (caution against using real names of churches and people). Encourage students to talk about the impact those events had on their lives and their community.

Ask, “Based on these kinds of interactions, what conclusions would an unbeliever draw about Jesus?” Remind students that the way we treat each other as Christians not only affects us, but it is a witness to others about Christ.

Ask students to think about things in their own lives that keep them from “the unity of the Spirit” and “the bond of peace.”

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Roadblocks to Unity” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work individually.