

† The Heart of Christ – the message of the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17)

“...having loved His own who were in the world, He love them to the end”(John 13:1.)

The Praying Savior – John 17

The Lessons from Jesus’ Prayer – John 17:1-26

Seven Characteristics of the Church: Unity (John 17:20-23)

20 I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; 21 that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. 22 The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

Ulysses Grant, the chief general of the Union Army and the eighteenth President of the United States, loved horses, but suffered much misfortune with a series of dogs. While in the White House, each died of unknown causes, although a bit of foul play was suspected. When Jesse Grant, his son, voiced fears that his treasured Newfoundland was fated to go the same way, the president summoned the White House steward. Jesse Grant, the son, later wrote, “Father asked no questions, made no accusations?” Rather, President Grant ended the matter with a simple political promise saying, “Jesse has a new dog. You may have noticed that his former pets have been particularly unfortunate. When this dog dies, every employee in the White House will be at once discharged.” The Newfoundland, named Faithful, enjoyed superb health throughout Grant's tenure in the White House. Isn't it amazing what a properly motivated group of people can accomplish?

Beloved, as we come together this morning, it is my hope and prayer that we can also be a properly motivated group of people, accomplishing more and more to the glory of God. As I read that story about President Grant, I asked myself, what was it that allowed the White House staff to work together to accomplish the goal of keeping Faithful healthy and live? In a word, they had been motivated to unity. That had a common mission and by the express will of the President they worked together and were of one heart and mind in this purpose.

If you have not already noticed, this morning I wish to speak to you concerning the topic of unity. Unity is the fifth marker or characteristic that we see in this prayer of Jesus for His church. God's people are to be noted by one another and even by unbelievers as people of joy, of holiness, of truth, of mission and now, here in verses 20-23, also of unity.

But before we look specifically at what Jesus prays for concerning unity, we need to have a working definition for unity. What is true, Biblical unity? What is this unity that Jesus prays for His Church? Allow me to give to you a simple definition of true biblical unity: *Biblical unity is knowing and living out perfectly the will of God to the glory of God.* (repeat). The terms may be simple, but if you are like me, you might be saying that knowing and living out perfectly the will of God to the glory of God is no small task. In fact, most of us, while perhaps agreeing with the idea, might also want to say that if this is the definition of unity, then it is impossible for us to obtain to, at least on this side of glory. Doesn't that excite you?

Over the past couple of weeks we have been taking about sanctification, of becoming more and more like Jesus; more and more unlike the world. We are called holy and called to be holy, perfectly like Jesus Christ. And we understand that as we strive to be like Jesus in this life,

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we will not be completely like Him until we see Him in glory. But that doesn't excuse us from striving after becoming increasingly holy, increasingly found in the image of Jesus. And the same is true for unity. If true, Biblical unity was something we could obtain on our own, in our flesh, then we would not be looking to and dependent upon God for experiencing increasing unity. So I for one am most grateful to the Lord that unity, as we shall see, is both a work of God in our lives as well as an effort on our part to demonstrate that working.

Far too often I see a tendency in churches to explain unity in terms other than knowing and living out perfectly the will of God to the glory of God. Often times the unity of the church is explained as something organizational. If we can just organize the church around a few issues that we all hold in common, then we can forget about doctrine and rally around those issues. But this is not what Jesus is praying for His Church. In fact, as we will see, doctrine becomes one of the key factors for unity. So then, while we may be able to vote some day for a Presidential candidate who although being Mormon or Catholic, shares our view that every life in the womb is sacred, or that people should be told that Jesus Christ died on the cross for their sins, such is not the same as saying that Mormons, Catholics and Evangelicals are unified as the Church, as one people of God; because ultimately, unity is knowing and living out perfectly the will of God to the glory of God, which is another way of saying that what brings unity is striving to faithfully live out all the doctrine or teachings of God as properly taught from the Bible.

So then, let me say it again, unity *is knowing and living out perfectly the will of God to the glory of God*. I promise to explain this more fully as we move through our text both this week and next week. Now, with this definition in hand, let us look to our text, John 17:20-23 as we seek to understand the unity Jesus prays for His church so that we might then strive all the more after such unity. To accomplish this purpose, I offer you three considerations. If we are to obtain to the unity Jesus prays for, we must...

- I. Know the true **basis** of unity (John 17:20)
- II. Know the true **nature** of unity (John 17:21a)
- III. Know the true **goal** of unity (John 17:21b-23)

This morning we will look at our first point, the basis of unity and to that end we will consider four aspects to the basis of our unity.

I. We must know the true basis of unity (17:20)

I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word...

What is the basis, or the foundation upon which the unity of the church is built? Is unity something man-made or manufactured? Is it a program of the church? Some of the things we learn about the basis of unity are simple and yet let us not gloss over simplicity as unimportant. We do learn from this passage that unity begins with God. As we look at verse 20, let me note for you some observations we can make concerning the unity that Jesus prays for the church.

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1. **Unity begins with God**

To begin with, let us never forget that true biblical unity has its origin in God alone. We are not to be looking for unity by means of what programs, motivational techniques or systematic practices we can foster, but rather begin by looking to and depending upon God for true unity.

How is it I can say that unity has its origin or beginning in God? Let me remind you that from our text we find Jesus praying. And to whom is Jesus praying? He is praying to the Father. And for what is Jesus praying to the Father for? He says, **“I do not ask on behalf of these alone...”** Jesus is making His petition, making His request to God. Jesus knows that the unity of the church is not to be entrusted to the reason and rationalizations of men, but must come first from God.

We see this worked out in a practical way in 1 Corinthians 14. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul was getting after the church at Corinth for disorderly worship. For anyone walking into one of the worship services at Corinth at the time, the scene he would have evidently seen is one of chaos, people off eating and drinking in one place, others supposedly worshipping the Lord with all sorts of babbling, some trying to teach and be heard while another was at the same time trying to teach. In short, it was a mess. And Paul was trying to admonish them to get things in order, to have a proper and godly flow in the worship service. And then, to properly motivate them to that end, listen to what he says in 1 Corinthians 14:33. Here is the key to motivating the Corinthians to right worship. He says, **“for God is not a God of confusion [of chaos, of disorder, of dissention, of disunity] but of peace [of order, of unity], as is in all the churches of the saints.”** One of the unifying principles of all the saints is that God Himself is the God of unity and order. When we begin to focus our attention on God, on His details, on His order, on His will, then we begin to be unified. Unity begins with God.

2. **Unity is something to be prayed for**

The second thing I would have you notice about the unity of the church is that it is something to be prayed for. I know it is an obvious point of the text and I have already asked the question, for what is Jesus praying? ^[slide 06] He is praying for “unity.” He is asking the Father to bring to His people the knowledge and ability to live out the will of God to the glory of God. Jesus says, **“I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but also for those who believe in Me...”** The word for “ask” in our text means to pray, to beseech, to entreat. Jesus is praying to the Father for our unity.

Now the question we might ask ourselves is this, if Jesus prayed for our unity back there in the Upper Room, does He continue to pray for it; and, should we pray for it? Beloved, I have no doubt that one of the continued prays of Jesus for His people as He sits at the right hand of God making intercession for us is this prayer for unity (Hebrews 7:25).

Does Jesus continue to pray that His people would know and live out the will of God? We see evidence of this in Romans 8:31-38 as we read that nothing will separate us from the love of Christ; that nothing is to shake our confidence or resolve to live for God, why? Because according to Romans 8:34, Jesus is at the right hand of God, also interceding for us? In context this intercession of Jesus includes that we know that God’s will is that we will not be separated from the love of Christ, that we will not be discouraged in our resolve to follow Him. So then, Jesus prays for our unity, to know and live out perfectly the will of God to the glory of God.

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Should we be praying for unity for and amongst ourselves? Truly we should. First of all we should simply because it is right for us to pray for those things that Jesus prayed. What could be more biblical than to pray in light manner as Jesus prayed, especially for His church? In addition to this, we have much New Testament teaching to this end. In Ephesians 3:14-21, Paul prays for the church and then says in 4:1, “Therefore...” or “in light of this prayer for wisdom and knowledge in Christ...” and in verse 3 says, **“being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”** Paul prays for unity by means of the knowledge of God for the church at Ephesus. We can and must pray for this too. In Philippians 2:1-2, Paul exhorts the church that if they are walking in Christ, if they are in His Word and praying and worshipping together, then they ought to be resolved to be “of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.” In a word, they are to strive for “unity” – knowing and living out perfectly the will of God to the glory of God.

3. **Unity is for those who have faith in Christ**

A third observation concerning unity is that it is only for those who have faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus does not pray for the world to experience unity, because they cannot. But Jesus does say, **“I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but also for those who believe in Me...”** Faith, genuine, life-changing, heart transforming, mind renewing faith is the basis for unity. If you do not have such a faith in Christ, you cannot be unified with either God or His people. But what is faith in Christ? What does Jesus mean by saying **“those who believe in Me”**? What does it mean to believe? This is a sermon in itself, but let me summarize the New Testament teaching of what it means to believe in Jesus.

To believe in Jesus means knowing oneself to be a sinner, and Christ to have died for sinners. To believe in Jesus is to abandon all self-righteousness and self-confidence, and to cast oneself wholly upon Jesus for pardon and peace. To believe in Jesus is to exchange your own natural enmity and rebellion against God for a spirit of grateful submission to the will of Christ through the renewing of your heart by the Holy Spirit. To believe in Jesus, and note that “believe” in our text is in the present tense, meaning that to believe means to believe and keep on believing; you must be continually looking to Christ, speaking to Christ, crying to Christ, just as we are; confessing your sin and unbelief and casting yourself on His mercy; asking Him to give you a new heart, working in you true repentance and firm faith; asking Him to take away your evil heart of unbelief and to write His law within you, so that you may never henceforth stray from Him. To believe in Jesus is to turn to Him and trust Him as best you can, and pray for grace to turn and trust more and more. To believe in Jesus is to depend upon God’s grace expectantly, looking to Christ to draw near to you as you seek to draw near to Him. To believe it to watch, to pray, to read and to hear God’s Word. It is to worship and to commune with God’s people, and so continue till you know in yourself beyond doubt that you are indeed a changed being, a penitent believer, and the new heart which you desired has been put within you. To believe in Jesus is to know these needs and to call upon Him directly.¹

Without such a faith, such a believing in Jesus; without such a developing and increasing faith such as this, unity in the body of Christ will be lacking. So, let me ask each one of you this

¹ This paragraph is adapted by myself from J.I. Packer’s “Introductory Essay” to ‘The Death of Death in the Death of Christ’ by John Owen.

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question before we move on. Are you experiencing such a faith as this? Is this what you believe about Jesus and about yourself? If not, do not be ashamed and do not be dismayed. For today can be for you the day of salvation. Today can be for you the day in which you trust in Jesus in this way and become truly unified with God through Jesus and thus become an instrument for unity in the body of Christ, the Church. The only shame anyone should feel in this place is not coming to Jesus in the manner described, allowing pride, arrogance or self-confidence to blind you from the truth. Do not let any issue keep you from believing in Jesus this very moment. I fear for some adults, those who may say, “I’ve been attending this church for some time now, what would the people think if I all of a sudden call upon Jesus?” What would people think? First, the destiny of your eternal soul is not and should not be left to the realm of what do people think, so what if some consider you foolish, or of having procrastinated too long. The real question is your relationship to God right now. Will you believe in Jesus? And, if I might speak for the majority here as to what might we think if an adult, one who has seemingly made a profession of faith, who maybe had fooled others as well as himself into thinking he had believed; we would stand in awe of the grace and power of God to redeem you. We would worship the God who saves, who worked past all human obstacles to open your eyes to the truth. In short, we would rejoice for you and with you. Do you believe in Jesus?

Beloved, the great reason I believe for the vast disunity in the church today is because too many churches are filled with unregenerate, non-born-again people. The church and our culture has come to believe that by simply going to church (as if “church” was a place rather than people) and joining it and making a few adjustments to one’s schedule or life, that such makes them a Christian; that they now believe in Jesus. But where is the spiritual transformation? And the problem is that the longer such a person attends church, serves in the church, performs his good deeds and labors after religious activities, the harder it will be for that person to bow the knee to Jesus as Lord and Savior. Unity in the church is not founded by going to church, but by being in right relationship to the God of Unity, continually praying for increasing unity, by believing in Jesus who brought us to unity, first to God and then also to other believers in Jesus. John Calvin wrote, “Happy indeed is that attainment of unity of faith when all—from the highest to the lowest—aspire toward the Head!” (Book IV, Chapter I, section 5, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*).

4. Unity is a result of doctrine (taught truth)

I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word...

Now, I have been speaking much on what it means to believe in Jesus and that faith in the person and work of Jesus is a basis of our unity, our knowing and living out perfectly the will of God to the glory of God. But this faith is to be build upon something. This faith or believing in Jesus has a medium, a vehicle by which it is learned, understood and applied. If faith in Jesus is a basis of unity in the church, then the teachings or truths of that faith in Jesus must also be the basis of unity. Beloved, unity is a result of doctrine, of knowing and applying the truths of God’s Word to one’s life. Let me say this in another bold way; there is no unity among the people of God where there is little or wrong doctrine. Unity does not encompass diverse beliefs but rather diverse people. An organization that moves away from faithful teaching, true worship, and obedient discipling ceases to be a church. As John Calvin said, “*Those who wish to build the church by rejecting the doctrine of the Word build a pigsty, and not the church of God.*”

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Many of you are aware that over the past decade or two there has been an attempt by some well known evangelicals and Catholics to reunify the two rifts of the church, the Protestants and the Catholics. To that end, a couple of documents have been drafted that outlined all the common beliefs and common interests of the two groups, calling, pleading and urging all branches of Christianity to come together in order to display to the world “unity”. The problem with all of this is that it would only be an outward display of unity, because at the very heart of the problem is the purity of the gospel. The Catholic Church has and continues to oppose the Biblical teaching of justification by faith alone in Christ alone by adding human works and efforts as needful to man’s salvation. So long as the doctrine of how a person is made right before God is not agreed upon; so long as one party insists that man contributes to his own salvation, teaching in effect that the work of Christ on the cross was not enough, then there can be no true unity. We cannot neglect the truth of the Word of God. As B.B. Warfield once said, “To be indifferent to doctrine is thus but another way of saying we are indifferent to Christianity.” What is peculiar to Christianity is not its religious sentiment, or its provoked feelings, but its message of salvation, that is, its doctrine.

Notice how Jesus ends verse 20. It should be viewed as both expected and as unusual. As Jesus is praying, making His way toward the request of unity, He says, **“I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but also for those who believe in Me through their word...”** What is expected here is a reference to the word, which we have seen repeatedly in the Upper Room discourse as well as in each of the markers of the church. Joy is a result of knowing the things that Jesus spoke of. Holiness is a result of having been given the Word of God. Truth is ultimately another name for the Word of God. Our mission is based upon being changed by the Word of God. And now, expectedly, unity is going to be based upon the word. That is expected. But what is unexpected and seemingly unusual is that Jesus does not here speak of God’s Word or of His word, but rather of **“their word”** – the word or teaching or doctrine according to these disciples/apostles.

Let us not miss the importance or the progression. Jesus speaks the Word of God, preaching the good news, the gospel, and God’s Word are declared to be His words. God’s Word is truth and therefore the Words of Jesus are truth. Then in verse 18, Jesus sends His disciples out into the world with that truth, the words of God. And what does Jesus do here in verse 20? Jesus validates and confirms that the teachings of the apostles are going to be the very truths the Father gave Jesus and Jesus gave the disciples. The same words that Jesus taught and transformed the disciples would be the words that the disciples would take into the world in order to see others transformed. And those transformed people would do what, take that same truth and teach it to others.

Jesus says here in His prayer that the means by which this oneness and unity of the church would be obtained is through, or by means of the words, or doctrines, teachings of the apostles. Apart from this foundation, apart from the proclamation of the true word of God, there is no means for the unity of believers. This has always been true for unity in the body of Christ. Look with me at Romans 15:4-5. Here we see how the truth of Scripture is the only basis for unity in the body.

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4 For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. [doctrine – teachings] 5 Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus [unity], 6 so that with one accord [unity] you may with one voice [unity] glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Jesus' prayer we find that Jesus sanctions teachings of the apostles as the means of unity in the church. Therefore doctrine is not secondary; nor is doctrine divisive (false or incorrect doctrine and the pride of man is divisive); but is rather the key to unity. We could unite ourselves around the idea that it is good to allow the Pastor to wear jeans to work everyday. That might be a good rallying point. It might make us feel good because we all would like to wear jeans to work. Such a unifying principle is easy to work with. It won't offend that many people. But in the grand scheme of things it is meaningless. Such a position will not win people to Christ because it has nothing to do with Christ. And yet how much of any given church's positions are build more upon things like allowing the Pastor to wear jeans to work rather than boldly stating the truth of God?

So then, when a church says that her rallying cry will be, "God is absolutely sovereign" and according to Daniel 4 accounts all the inhabitants of the earth as nothing, "but does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" Wait now, that's doctrine, that's divisive. What? Such a truth points us to the majesty and wonder of God. Such a truth causes us to ask with David, "What is man that you are mindful of him?" Such a truth causes us to get our eyes off of self and to look to God. Such a truth unifies God's people, causing them to live differently, to talk differently and ultimately to be seen by the world as a peculiar people.

Beloved, the doctrines of God do not divide God's people, they are the means by which God's people are truly brought together and enabled to be a testimony to the world of the life-transforming power of God's Word and of God's Son sent to the world. Do you believe in Jesus because you have come to the teachings of the apostles, which is another way of saying the New Testament letters? Why should we be reading, learning and meditating on the Word of God? Because beloved, it is the God-appointed means of true unity in the church, a unity that Jesus says will impact the world with the gospel.

Let us therefore repent of seeking unity from someplace other than from God. Let us commit to being more prayerful for unity in the church. Let us examine ourselves to see if we are indeed "in the faith"; that we believe in Jesus. And let us devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching by which we are unified in our faith. Remember, unity is knowing and living out perfectly the will of God to the glory of God. We have looked at the basis of this unity this morning. Let us work on these things and next week we will delve into the nature and goal of this unity.

Soli Deo Gloria

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