

Christian Unity: The Foundation for Unity (Part 1)

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John 17. I'm going to be guided by my notes this morning. I'm going somewhere with this - three messages, the Lord willing, on the subject of Christian unity. I want to do some clarifying hopefully this morning, laying some foundation, and then we'll get into some more practical things tonight and tomorrow. And this is another one of those subjects that can be difficult. I don't claim to have all the answers. I imagine that if you're like me, if you have any age on you at all, you've had to work through some of these things and try to come to conclusions. And some of the conclusions you've come to may not be exactly right. You may continue to grow and maybe shift some in your understanding and the outworking of this. That's kind of where I see myself. I'm 59 and I still haven't arrived. I'm still a work in progress. (incomplete thought) I don't think fundamentally I've changed from my younger years. Fundamentally, I mean, the truths, the doctrines of Scripture - I'm fundamentally now where I was twenty or thirty years ago. But the working out of that doctrine has definitely changed in my own life. So I say all that at the outset. I want this to be a help to you.

I'm going to John 17. Did I tell you that already? We're starting there. Let me just read a couple of verses here that we're going to be hopefully gleaning our thoughts from. I honestly feel when I come to this chapter that we're sort of approaching holy ground. And I know all of Scripture is holy. It's the holy Scriptures, but there's something about John 17. We are actually being given the privilege of listening in on a prayer of our Savior. And that's an amazing thought. And it's one of those passages of Scripture that you don't want to read quickly, and I don't want to read quickly the words that I'm going to read.

And I'm not going to read all of the prayer. I would encourage you to take time to do that, perhaps even later today. But I'm just going to read verse 11, and then 20 through 23. We can speculate about what all is going on in the mind of Christ. He's the Son of God. He's the Son of Man. He is speaking as the Son of God. This is a high priestly prayer, but He's speaking also in the context of His being as a man. So He has thoughts going through His mind. It wouldn't be exactly like your thoughts or mine, but they certainly are thoughts of a man as He prays, even as they are thoughts of the very Son of God. He's reflecting on the glory that He had with the Father before the world began. He's reflecting on all that He left. And all of that is in Him. There's more in Him than any of us know. There's great mystery in this prayer. There's depths in this prayer that I still am seeking to enter into. I would encourage you that you need the Holy Spirit to enter into the depths of God. Your own spirit is not capable. That's what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2. It's the Spirit of God that teaches us who God is and leads us - I would encourage you to ask God to lead you. Ask the Spirit of God to teach you, to show you more fully, more clearly the things pertaining to God.

Jesus says, verse 11, "And now, I am no more in the world." Speaking prophetically - it's speaking as if it is, but this is what is coming. And in His prayer, He's thinking of this. (incomplete thought) He's coming to the cross. But He's seeing beyond that, but He can't go

beyond that without going through the cross. So that's where He is as He's praying. "And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world." His disciples. "And I come to Thee, Holy Father. Keep through Thine own name those whom Thou has given Me, that they may be one as We are." That they may be one as We are. Verse 20. "Neither pray I for these alone..." - the disciples, the apostles - "...But for them also which shall believe on Me through their word, that they all may be one, as Thou Father art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me, and the glory which Thou hast given Me, I have given them, that they may be one, even as We are one, I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be made perfect in one and that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me and hast loved them as Thou hast loved Me." Amazing words.

Unity

Unity. Unity among the saints is an ultimate concern of the Triune God. An ultimate - ultimate concern. Jesus uses language in this portion of His high priestly prayer that I'm still seeking to fully appreciate. What is He saying? I in them, and Thou in Me. There's something about the relationship with the Father and Son that Jesus is praying that we may experience, we may enter into that unity. It's the pattern of the unity for which Jesus prays. There is an expression called "the community of properties." I don't want to get too complicated here, partly because I can't, but I want to introduce this idea to you. The community of properties.

And I think it's important to see that when Jesus says, as the Father is in Me - "I in Thee, Thou in Me," what is He saying? There is something about the Being of God in the Person of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, that is essentially one. Essentially, there is a sameness, so that Jesus could say, "if you've seen Me, you have seen the Father." There is something about Jesus Christ, something about the Father, something about the Holy Spirit that is one. There is something that is distinct as well so that the Son can be praying to the Father, so that the Father is not the Son. Amazing - there are people who teach that, that the Father is the Son, and the Son is the Father. The Father is not the Son. The Son is not the Father. But there is a community of properties in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit so that They are one. There's something that is the same, and there is something that is distinct so that They are three Persons that function in three different capacities in absolute, total unity. That's what we call the Trinity. He says that they - talking about the disciples or those who will believe the words of the apostles - "they all may be one..." in Us. That's what He says. That's the prayer that they all may be one in Us. Every believer is brought into a mystical, spiritual union with the Triune God as Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit.

The Believer is Included

Did I just step onto some controversial thought there? I hope not. Regardless of all of our fleshing out of the baptism with the Holy Spirit, we know that Jesus said He would do it. He would baptize. In fact, in Acts 1:5, He says not many days from then, He would baptize. Then 1 Corinthians 12:13, it's a past reference there - something that has happened that we participate in. We drink of the same Spirit. There is a sameness that exists in every single believer. Every believer possesses the same Holy Spirit. There is one body. There is no longer Jew or Gentile. There is no longer a division. Ephesians 1-3 speak of this significantly. Paul makes this point. In

Christ, we are one. In Christ. We have one Shepherd. There is one fold. Jesus does not view us - and as He prays here, there is a sense in which Jesus, He told Peter, "I have prayed for you." So there is a sense in which we can say Christ prays for me, but here Jesus is praying for us. He's not viewing us as autonomous, isolated believers. But joined together by the Father and Son through the Spirit as a spiritual temple, living stones as Peter calls it, who are joined together with all who are believers in Heaven and in earth. I think of this as the eschatological church - that glorious church without spot or wrinkle, which is the hope, the ultimate culmination of Jesus' prayer here, I believe. In fact, He says in v. 24, "Father, I will that they also whom You have given Me be with Me where I am that they may behold My glory which You've given Me, for Thou lovest Me before the foundation of the world." That's where it's all headed. Ultimately, the glorious church. But every New Testament church is supposed to reflect that glorious church now in this age. And that's really what I want to ultimately focus on as we proceed through our thoughts this morning, tonight, and tomorrow.

The Foundation of Unity Found in Christ

But today, right now, I want to establish this foundation because the unity that we experience doesn't happen in the energy of our flesh; it doesn't come out of thin air - it comes from a foundation, and that foundation is who we are in Christ. In verse 22, Jesus says, "And the glory which You gave Me, I have given them, that..." in order that - and you'll see a number of those in verses 20-23 - the word "that" or "in order that" - I don't know what your translation says. It may say "in order that," but that's the idea. In order that "they may be one, even as We are one." So here's another basis for unity among His people. A shared glory. Jesus says, "And the glory which You gave Me, I have given them." What's He talking about? What is the glory that His Father has given Him? Because that's what Jesus says has been given to believers, which then results in essential unity comparable to the Father and the Son. So there's something about the Father - the glory that the Father gave to the Son that is comparable to the glory that we are receiving that then is the basis - one of the bases for our experience of unity. So what is that? What glory did the Father give to the Son in His humiliation? He honored His Son. And He honored His Son as His Son. He pronounced that. He pronounced it at His baptism. He pronounced it at the Transfiguration. He pronounced it in the resurrection: This is My beloved Son.

2 Peter 1:17, Peter alludes to this as he's referring to the Transfiguration. And he says, "For He received from God the Father honor and glory." The glory which the Father has given - Father, the glory You've given to Me. "For He received from God the Father honor and glory when there came such a voice to Him from the excellent glory, 'This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.'" You see, the Son did not glorify Himself. And this was a major point that Jesus made while He was upon the earth. In John 8:54, Jesus answered, "If I honor Myself, My honor is nothing. It is My Father that honors Me, of whom you say that He is your God." It is My Father that honors Me. The writer of Hebrews in Hebrews 5:5 says that Christ did not bring the glory of this high priestly appointment upon Himself. He didn't glorify Himself. He didn't appoint Himself. This came from His Father.

And then, in His resurrection, what does Paul say in Romans 1:4? "...And declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead."

And then in Acts 13:33, that same concept - in the resurrection of Jesus Christ there is that declaration: This is My Son. In Acts 13:33, "God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children in that He hath raised up Jesus. Again, as it is also written in the second Psalm "Thou art My Son. This day have I begotten Thee." You see, this is the glory the Father gave to the Son. He pronounced Him His Son. He announced this relationship with Jesus Christ His Son.

See, the point is that this glory has been given to every believer. This glory, this honor of sonship. We are called the children of God. We're adopted into His family. "But as many as received Him, to them gave He power (authority) to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name which were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of men, but of God." We have been given the right to be called the children of God. He has pronounced us His children. He has adopted us. He's given us the Spirit of adoption. I love Romans 8 - the whole chapter. But Romans 8, the description that's given here in verses 14-17. We're thinking here of this glory. Jesus prays, "Father, the glory that You have given Me may be in them." What is that glory? We've been called sons - every believer. We have a common bond here in this. Romans 8:14, "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God, for you have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption whereby we cry, 'Abba, Father.'" We do. Every child of God has the same relationship. The greatest saint in this room has no greater privilege than the least saint in this room. We'll talk about that Saturday morning, about what it is to be great. It's a level playing field, we might say. This is the glory that has been placed upon us. We're children. We're sons. We have access. "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ." This is what He's praying.

And then we share in the resurrection glory don't we? "That we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory which shall be revealed in us, for the earnest expectation of the creature waits for the manifestation of the sons of God." That's us who have been joined to Christ; who are possessors of the Spirit of Christ. So we are now one with God. Now. Right now. We are one with God. And also one with every other believer as the children of God in the family of God which does extend beyond our own local churches. It's every believer - we are one with every believer - whether we agree on everything or not. And Jesus prays for this. And then He died for it. Then He rose again, and then He ascended, and then the Spirit came. The Spirit was sent to unite us in order to accomplish what He prays for.

So believer, I say, be overwhelmed by this. Be overwhelmed by what God has done. Be overwhelmed as you read Jesus' prayer here. He's praying for you, not in isolation from your brothers and sisters in Christ, but as part of an incredibly large family really. Although sometimes it seems that we're so small and isolated. We're really not in the big picture. The blessings that are yours now and forever. You are one. You're one in God. You are in God and God is in you. Isn't that an amazing thought! Eternal life is in you. This is why you have the desires you have. This is why you have the longings that you have. This is why you have relationships that are not of this world; relationships that go beyond this life. You're part of a family that transcends genealogical relationships. One in Christ. I dare say some of you have closer relationships with fellow blood-bought believers than you do your own biological family.

Thankfully, some of us have biological family members who are in Christ as well, so the bond is double. The relationship is enhanced, but it's a struggle having biological family that you must relate to. Sometimes it's a spouse. Sometimes it's children. You must relate to them. It's a godly thing, biblical thing. You must relate to them, but it comes with its difficulties. Though when Christ comes and you're made one in Christ, everything changes.

Jesus Prays for this Unity

But this is the essential unity that Jesus has in view as He prays. The essential unity. This is really a unity that doesn't depend on you. This is a unity that depends upon Him. He has established this unity. It's the foundation from which we are to experience unity in this world with other believers. And it's most clearly witnessed in relationships formed in churches, which is really what is unfolded in the rest of the New Testament, how this all fleshes out, works out in our lives. I was talking to a brother this morning about this, and as we can talk about our unity with our brothers all over the world, but the reality is it's where we live that we experience this unity. So it's one thing to talk about the idea of unity; it's another thing to work it out, and that's where we need to be - working out this unity, in particular, those that we are in relationship with on a regular basis.

Now, let me give some points of clarification here. I think it's necessary. This portion of Jesus' prayer has been very misunderstood and abused by many. Unity for some has displaced truth and the distinctives of biblical Christianity so that unity becomes - or at least their concept of unity, and oftentimes I think it's more of a unity of humanity than it is a unity in Christ. And while I know it's possible to ignore unity as we fight and divide with everyone who holds a different point of view or practice - maybe that's where we are. Maybe that's where we need to most guard ourselves, but the greater danger I believe, at least, on a larger scale is to become all-inclusive. All religions lead to God. So that we're even coming to the table to try to find out where at least do we agree with let's say Muslims, so that we can at least live together and work together, because after all, there is only one God and they believe there's only one God, and so we're moving together toward this one God. They have a different path - we have our path, but you know, Christ prayed that we'd be one.

So there is that ecumenical spirit and movement that exists, and sometimes we can be pulled over into that more than we should. And I'll comment on this a little more probably in the next message. We cannot promote or participate in a unity that is not based upon the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We just can't. Flat out can't. Now there are other areas we have to flesh out, work out, how far can we go, how much can we join, etc. I get that. I still struggle with that. But I know this for sure, we cannot join together in fellowship with those who are not agreed upon us in the basic doctrine of the Lord Jesus Christ; the grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ. An attempt to experience unity that ignores the essential unity expressed by Jesus in this prayer is dangerous and actually works against the unity for which He prays.

So let's think for just a few moments about what Jesus prays here. In v. 20 in particular, "...Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word." You see who He's praying for. He's not praying for everybody. He's already said earlier, "I pray not for the world, I pray for these," at that point focusing in on His disciples. Here, He expands it to those who believe the words of the apostles. It's a unity based upon apostolic

doctrine then. It's a unity based upon the word that comes to us through the apostles. The Scriptures. This is the Word that Jesus said in v. 6, "they had kept." He said to His father, "They have kept Thy Word." In v. 8, He says, "They believed that You sent Me." Others didn't, but these did. Essential doctrine. You see, Jesus spoke that which was given to Him. In John 12:49, He said, "I've spoken that which the Father has given to Me." I am speaking that which is in agreement with My Father. And the Jews of that day rejected Him. They called Him a blasphemer, but these believed that He came down. These believed that He was sent. They believed that He was the Son of God. You remember, the Apostle Peter, when Jesus says, "Will you also go away?" said, "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." And though I understand that the apostles were lacking in a full understanding of Gospel truth, they had the Gospel truth they had and believed what Jesus said. More was revealed and it's written to us in the completed record of Scripture. But what I am saying here is that godly unity cannot disregard the faith once delivered to the saints. You cannot lay the Scriptures aside in favor of an experience called unity. I like to get along with everybody. I don't like to feel that spirit of division, that unwelcomed, unwelcoming spirit. I don't like that.

But we can't be gullible. The Bereans were not charged with being disrupters of unity when they searched the Scriptures to see if the things that Paul was preaching were so. So don't think that you're fighting against the prayer of Jesus when you are seriously searching the Scriptures to see if what you're hearing - even what you're hearing this morning - is it really true? Is it really so? Search it out. I'm not going to call you a disrupter of unity if you're honestly searching out the truth of God's Word. And if you're asking honest questions, I'm not going to say to you, well, you're a disrupter of the unity. You need to keep those questions to yourself. Why would I say that? If I perceive that your spirit is right? Teaching on the experience of unity in Ephesians 4, Paul pressed the church toward unity of the faith which would protect against every wind of doctrine. So it's important that we grow in the faith. It's important that this unity is established upon the truth that is found in these Scriptures properly understood. As you know, the devils know this book very well. Godly unity in Christ is expressed by mutual submission to the authority of God through His Word.

As I speak every week at the prison, that's the one thing I tell those guys. By the time I leave them - they have a six month rotation in that room - by the time I leave them, I want them to know that this is the authority. And then I recently had one of the prison guards meet me out and he's interacting with me, and he's challenging me on that. And he's saying this can't be the final authority. I mean, don't you know that when these words were given, they had to carry them around and they couldn't carry the whole binding of these words. So only a little bit was given then. So over time, since the book of Revelation, over time, there's been more given. Of course, he was Roman Catholic and he was giving me the Roman Catholic dogma that the church has authority. What the church says is authoritative. And the Word of God is not the final authority. This is the final authority. And so the unity must be based upon the final authority.

The Unity of the Saints

And then, I want you to see that Christ - what He says in v. 20, He says, "For them also which shall believe on Me..." not only through their word, but "believe on Me." So He's talking about believers. It's a unity of saints. True believers. It's a unity of eternal life believers. Those

who, as He prays in the beginning, that You've given Him - Jesus has power, authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You've given Him. And this is life eternal, that they might know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You've sent. Eternal life believers. Not those who simply believe the fact that He's the Son of God, like the demons in Luke 4, being cast out, they cried out, "We know who You are! You are the Christ, the Son of God." So just knowing that Jesus is the Messiah; knowing that He's the Son of God doesn't mean you have eternal life. Jesus is not praying for unity of a cultural or political nature; those who just are professing to be Christians. We're a "Christian culture." We're Christians. They're Jews. They're Muslims. That sort of thing. Or family - you know, my family's Christian. They've always been Christian. I was born a Christian. Well, that's just simply untrue. That's a lie. It's not possible to be born a Christian. The eternal life believers are those who have experienced union with God. Have you experienced union with God? Have you been a receiver of the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus? Is that the Spirit that's living in you? That's working in you?

Jesus is not praying for unity among those who believe in a Jesus of their own making. I don't want to spend much time on that one because I think you understand what I'm saying there. There is another Jesus. Paul warned about that. He was concerned about that even with the Corinthians and the Corinthian church among the saints. He was concerned about them getting their eyes off of the true Jesus. There are a lot of folks today who are using the name Jesus and it's another spirit. Try the spirits whether they are of God. He's not praying for unity among those who are believing a message that is not the apostolic Gospel of the Son of God. Like Paul says in Galatians 1:6-9 - is it another gospel? Are you hearing another gospel? As you listen to those who are saying they believe in Jesus; saying that they believe in salvation - as you listen to them, what are they really saying? And you need to listen to them. You don't just seek for unity with those who say "Jesus" or even use the word "gospel." Is it truly a Gospel of grace? Are you hearing additions? Maybe even subtly or slightly. Be careful. We don't want to lay burdens on people that God hasn't laid. God has laid burdens upon His people to seek to be justified by their own works. Why would we lay that burden on people? We believe that we will all be justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Jew and Gentile - it makes no difference.

So we must stay clear of that spirit which embraces everyone who simply says they believe in God or believe in Jesus or believes in a gospel. Tim Challies said this, "Ecumenism is not true unity. It is a lie. It is a lie agreed upon." It is a lie agreed upon. "One that inoculates lost souls to the life-transforming truth of the Gospel." One that inoculates lost souls. They're deceived. "To the life-transforming truth of the Gospel." Thinking they are something they're not. Thinking they have something they don't. No, Jesus is praying for those to whom He gives eternal life. Eternal life believers. These are the ones who believe on Him because they know Him, and because they want to know Him. Christ is everything. Take what you will from my life - possessions, relationships, whatever it may be, but Jesus Christ - I must have You! I must have You! These are the kinds of believers Jesus is praying for. These are the ones who possess the transforming life of God in their souls. I'm not what I was, and I'm still seeing things in my life that disturb me because I see that they disturb a holy God that I love and worship and want to serve. I'm mortifying, I'm putting to death. This is an active thing in my life. These are the kinds of believers that Jesus is praying for. These are the ones that not only come to Christ to meet

their desperate need of forgiveness of sins to be one with God, but ones who follow Him because they are truly united with Him.

Forgiveness of our sins - oh, don't underestimate that. Don't belittle that. Sometimes I hear people say, oh, you just believe in the forgiveness of sins. Don't talk like that. Are you kidding me? Do you know what Jesus did that our sins would be forgiven? Huge! That's huge! But the life of the believer doesn't stop with that reality. The life of the believer goes on with Christ. Follows Him. Pursues Him. Not in order to become more justified, but in order to be more like Him. That's our desire. These are the ones for whom Jesus prays. This is the unity that He's praying for. These are the kinds of people that we want to be with. These are the kinds of people that we want to join together with. These are the kinds of people we want to have fellowship with. Eternal life believers who are in the family of God. We need to willingly and continually confess Him in practical ways in our lives. We need to confess this unity in practical ways, like this weekend - these few days right here. Hey listen, if you and I sat down long enough, you know, we'd disagree somewhere, right? Right? So, we could focus on that. And it may be something serious enough that needs to be focused upon. But that's not where our unity is grounded. Our unity is not grounded in our agreement or disagreement. Our unity is grounded in who we are in Christ and do we have the same Spirit working in us. So we want to experience godly unity on a true Gospel foundation.

I'm going to stop here. I'm going to pick this up in the next message and kind of explore this a little bit more - the experience of unity in the context of regular church life in particular. We confess our eternal union with God in Christ by our experience. It's kind of like everything else we confess. We confess to believe in Christ. But do we really? We confess to be one with Christ, one in Christ, but are we really? And one way we know that is by it being worked out in our lives experientially. See, we are the visible manifestation of Christ now in this world. We are. We're going to see that in that prayer, "that the world may believe," "that the world may know..." We are His manifestation. So we must not underestimate the significance of living out this unity that we have together in Christ. Sadly, there are a lot of folks who have been steered away from anything to do with the Gospel because they've seen too much within particular churches of people who are hating on one another, and they run from that as if that's the true representation of Christ. We need to be careful. May God help us.

Father, I pray that You would give us eyes to see, understanding, to be able to work these truths out in our lives. Oh, that we would contemplate more fully, Lord Jesus, what You have done, and hear the words of Your prayer and how our Father, unity delights You. We are one in You, with You, and You with us. I pray that You would bless us in the meditations upon this truth that is deeper than we can fully comprehend. Please help us. Grant to us the ministry of the Holy Spirit as we not only think through these matters. We're not interested in simply having a deeper academic understanding; we want to know the reality of what You have prayed. Help us. In Christ's name I pray, Amen.