

# Jesus' Abiding Prayer for His Church – John 17:20-26

CBC Ilderton

A. Hall

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Have you ever noticed how many different kinds of churches there are? If you were to drive through London, you might notice all sorts of different churches: Reformed, Presbyterian, Baptist, Congregational, United, Anglican, Mennonite, Disciples of Christ, Brethren, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, and the list could go on. By outward appearances, the Christian church seems more divided and split into different denominations than ever before. For many people outside of the Christian faith, the appearance of these different groups seems to beg the question: did Jesus' prayer for unity among his disciples fail? Are we to seek the unity of the Church universal, and if so, how?

While much ink has been spilt on this aspect of these verses, it is actually not the central focus of Jesus' prayer here. By focusing on the one aspect of unity here in John 17, people have spent much time gazing at one tree in the forest of God's redemptive work.

While unity is important, it is not central to Jesus' thinking. Therefore, we need to understand how unity fits into this prayer because understanding Jesus' heart is essential for our success.

When Jesus prays, what ought to stand out to us is the movement of the prayer. This prayer is united in its focus and goal. There is a logical progression – from Jesus' prayer for himself, for his 11 disciples who are with him, and for us. And when we see the unity of thought that Jesus has in this prayer, we realize that unity is one part of a larger concern that Jesus has – and that is for the mission of God to be successful.

## **Pray for missional unity**

As Jesus moves his way through this prayer, the intentionality of it is quite remarkable. There is a unity to his prayer that we do not want to overlook. At the beginning, Jesus prayed for himself, asking that the Father would glorify him in order to reveal the Father so that those to whom the Son would give eternal life would know the Father. Then Jesus prayed for his disciples – that they would know, obey, and love the Word of Christ and be protected as they would be sent out. And now Jesus prays for us – for the Church universal – that his mission that has been entrusted to the apostles would continue to move forward.

In other words, this is a missional prayer. Over and over Jesus has referred to how he has been sent by the Father, and he has sent his disciples, and we too, are sent. In order for the mission to move forward, Jesus now makes it clear what is needed:

That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you (v. 21a)

That they may be one even as we are one (v. 22b)

I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one (v. 23a)

What Christ prays for is a supernatural unity that is empowered by and reflective of the Triune God. Just as the Father and Son are unique and distinct persons, they are one in

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will and purpose, in essence and substance. The three-in-one Godhead ought to be the way that believers look – united with Christ and with one another.

When genuine believers meet one another, there is a kindred spirit about them. They recognize one another. In my mission trips, I have found that whether in the slums of Honduras, the remote villages of Quebec, the border towns of Mexico, or the oppressed Christian in Russia, there was a connection. We knew we had Christ in common, and together we were pulling together. We might not have been able to speak the same language, but our heart language was the same.

A.W. Tozer described this experience of Spirit-wrought believers this way:

“Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshipers met together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be were they to become ‘unity’ conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship. Social religion is perfected when private religion is purified.” (A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House, n.d.), 95).

The more we know of Christ, the more we are drawn together. But unity does not mean uniformity. The Triune God is united as one in essence and substance, having one will, yet distinct in personhood and role. For this reason, Paul could pray for the Corinthians that they would use their various gifts as one body.

But the goal is not unity for unity's sake. When Jesus prays for our unity, he places a particular emphasis on why he wants us to be one:

“...that the world may believe that you have sent me” (v. 21b)

“...that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (v. 23b)

The goal of unity is mission! A united church is a church on mission, displaying to the world around them in word and deed that God the Father sent his Son, and that Son sends us out with the same message and mission. For this reason, Thomas Manton, the puritan pastor, would say, “Divisions in the church breed atheism in the world” (Manton, quoted in John Stott, *Christ the Liberator* (Downers Grove, IVP, 1971), 11).

Unity, however, isn't something we manufacture. It is something divinely given to us. We are saved and brought into Christ, and we continue to grow together by looking away from ourselves and looking to Christ. For this reason, Paul would pray for the Ephesians that they would “maintain the unity of the Spirit...” (Eph. 4:3). So if unity isn't something we create, and if unity is in Christ, then how do we maintain it?

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Jesus' prayer has been instructive to his disciples on how this unity is maintained. If we are to see success in mission, we need to understand how we maintain this unity. Back in v. 11 he prayed for their unity and he continually connects our unity to his unity with the Father. And Jesus makes it clear that his union with the Father has been maintained by doing only what the Father has commanded him and saying only what the Father has spoken. In John 12:49, for example, Jesus says, "For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment – what to say and what to speak." This was his consistent pattern. And this means that unity is maintained by two things:

First, unity is maintained by the message – and that message is knowing the Word of the Father. Jesus has already prayed for his disciples that they would be sanctified in the truth, and that truth is his Word (v. 17). The success of the mission and the unity of the Church can only be maintained as we remain faithful to the message given to us. Like any organization, if you have a diverse message about what your mission is, the organization will quickly splinter and fail. So Jesus reminds us that there is one message: he was sent into the world to reveal the Father, and his disciples are to continue to do the same thing. We come to the Father through the Son by confessing our sin and trusting in Christ alone, not by anything we do. This is the Gospel – it is a message that we are rescued not by what we do but by what Christ has done. So we maintain unity by maintaining the message.

Second, unity is maintained by the method – and the method is keeping the Word of the Father. Jesus makes it clear that our unity depends upon us keeping the Word. In v. 6 he had prayed for his disciples and was praying for their success. And the tools of their success would be that Christ's disciples have been given the Word and have kept the word. In other words, as we draw near to Christ together, we seek to be obedient and desire to love Christ and obey him.

While much ink has been spilt talking about how the Church today is divided, there is much more unity in the Church of Jesus Christ. Regardless of denominational affiliation, when a local church and local believers trust in Christ alone for their salvation, we have more in common than we have differences. Our unity does not depend upon having every "i" dotted and "t" crossed the exact same way. Rather, our unity comes from believing that our salvation is in the Lord Jesus Christ. And regardless of the denominational label, when we believe and keep the Word of Christ, we are united and are able to move the mission forward together.

## **Pray for missional love**

At the heart of mission must be love. We know that love is central to the heart of mission because God loved the world in this way: he gave his only begotten Son that whoever would believe in him would not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16). The love that the Father had to save sinners is the love Jesus displayed. In his final hours, John tells us that Jesus loved his disciples to the very end (Jn 13:1). And now, Jesus prays out of his heart of love for his disciples.

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Francis Schaeffer, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest apologists, said, "Evangelism is a calling, but not the first calling. Building congregations is a calling, but not the first calling. A Christian's first call is to...return to the first commandment to love God, to love the brotherhood, and then to love one's neighbor as himself" (Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time in The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, 5 vols (Westchester IL: Crossway, 1982), 1:85).

Jesus' prayer is a prayer of love: "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world" (v. 24). The love that Jesus received from his Father was the love that motivated and sustained his mission. And now that love is the goal of his mission: he wants his people to see and know the glory that was his because of the Father's love.

What will sustain God's people in mission? What will help us to endure the ridicule of people who do not understand the message? What will keep us going when we are despised and rejected, when people hide their faces from us and don't esteem us? Jesus prays that we would know the Father and his deep love. And he continues to pray that we would know him and his love.

What happens when you know you are loved? I think of what happens to a child who is dearly loved. Their home is secure, and they are safe. They are cherished and helped. They are taught and trained. They are disciplined for the purpose of improvement. And that child generally flourishes. The security, the correction, the training helps them to flourish. In the same way, when we know that the love that the Father has for Jesus is also the love given to us, we are secure. We can face hardship. We have a refuge in the storm. We have someone who is the lover of our souls who will keep us no matter what. Even if the world does not know the Righteous Father, Jesus has made him known to us so that the world might know the love of the Father.

And by our love for one another people will know that we are Jesus' disciples and that the Father sent the Son. Our love for God, for one another, and for our neighbour is not disconnected. God pours his love into our hearts so that we might be a people who love others with his love, and that we might be a Church who goes with the sword of the Spirit to heal the wounded, to free the captives, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (see Isa. 61:1-2b), and see the mission of God advance. As we go together with the apostolic method and message, and as we go in the love of God for us, the world around us will know that the Father sent the Son to save sinners – like you and me.