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## Unity of the Church

### John 17:20-23

**Intro:** We are discussing the distinguishing characteristics of the church that Jesus is putting forth in His high-priestly prayer of [ch17](#). We have looked at the first 4 characteristics that will identify the true church, the Body of Christ. The 1<sup>st</sup> is joy – the Body of Christ should both experience and example the joy of Christ and it will only do so through the consistent study and faithful application of God’s Word to their lives. The 2<sup>nd</sup> distinguishing mark of the church is holiness. Those that make up the Body of Christ should be identified by their holiness. God’s people have been set apart by God for His purposes and our lives should always reflect that fact and it will as we discover who God is and what He is like in His Word. The Bible reveals to us the ultimate reality of God in eternity and it stands in stark contrast to the false concepts that are everywhere projected by the physical world in which we live.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> mark of the Church is truth. This truth includes but is not limited to the Bible. We have been granted God’s truth in 3 ways: His Word, His Son and His Spirit. The truth of God’s Word not only brings His joy and holiness into our lives but it serves as the ultimate authority and standard of conduct for the church. Without God’s truth, we as the church have nothing left to offer the world. No matter what amazing works we may accomplish in the world (social, financial, political); if we fail to offer the truth of the gospel, we fail to offer the world any real and lasting hope. This leads to the 4<sup>th</sup> mark of the church – our mission. God’s people have been commissioned by our Lord to carry the gospel into the world. We’re to do this as we experience His joy, exemplify His holiness and stand on His truth. We are called to be whole Christians taking the whole gospel to the whole world. The last 2 marks of the church found in this prayer are unity and love. We’ll deal with unity today and look at the characteristic of love next time.

The Bible teaches that God created man in His own image and one thing we know about God from His Word is that He is a relational God. As such, He has created us to be relational beings – humanity thrives in relationships. So it is not by accident that all of the distinguishing marks of the church concern the believer’s relationship to some thing or some person. Joy is the mark of

the believer in relationship to himself. It's the inevitable happy result of knowing and trusting Jesus more and more everyday. Holiness is the mark of our relationship to God. The more we learn about God and His goodness, the more we desire to be like Him. Truth is the mark in our relationship to the Bible. It only benefits us to the degree we accept it as the infallible Word of God, study it and apply it to our lives faithfully and obediently. Mission is the mark in our relationship to the world. It's why we're still here, why we pursue the other marks. The final 2 marks of unity and love deal with our relationship to all the rest of God's children.

**20-** This marks a shift in Jesus' prayer as He now focuses His attention on the future. We have previously stated that this is a progressive prayer: Jesus begins by praying for Himself (1-5); then proceeds to pray for His disciples (6-19). Now, Jesus begins to pray for all those who will come to faith in Him through the ministry efforts of these disciples.

This shift in focus points to 2 very amazing truths. 1<sup>st</sup>, Jesus knew that in a very short time, His disciples would fail Him. They would run and hide, or worse, deny they even know Him, at the point in His life when He most needed His friends. But, despite their failure, Jesus went to the cross knowing that His work would accomplish its intended goal – to make salvation available to all humanity. He knew it would be accomplished without any assistance from His disciples so He wasn't hoping for or counting on any help from them. But, this last section of the prayer does show that Jesus expected the failure of His disciples to only be temporary. Jesus knew that others would hear the gospel from these men and innumerable multitudes would come to faith in Jesus through their testimony or "their word." In fact, the entire tone of His farewell discourse (ch14-17) is built on the assumption that after His resurrection, these 11 men would renew their faith in Jesus and carry on a vibrant gospel ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit. By worldly standards of success, Jesus had little to show for His ministry here at the end. Yet, He is now leaving His earthly work full of unwavering confidence in the work of God in and through these disciples of His.

2<sup>nd</sup>, and most obvious, Jesus is not only praying for His disciples, He's praying beyond them: He's praying for us! Jesus knew that His intercession for the disciples would prevail and it did, gloriously. In exactly the same way, He knows that His intercession for us will also prevail. If He thought enough

to pray for us in the face of excruciating pain and a disgraceful death, how much more is His love and concern focused on us now when He is seated in glory at the Father's right hand? We should rest in the beauty of that thought and allow it to propel us into a loving obedience of His Word and a surest confidence of His divine plan for our lives.

**21** – Jesus begins to pray not only for us who live today, for the entire church throughout all the ages. He's already prayed for our security and for our sanctity but now the burden of His prayer is for our unity. His concern is that His people would experience the kind of unity that is similar to the oneness that exists between the Father and the Son.

Has this unity been realized in our time? The answer to that question would appear, for all intents and purposes, to be a resounding "NO!" The truth is, the current situation of the church seems so dire that was Christian writer has stated it as such, "Considering all the divisions that have plagued Christendom for 2000 years, its amazing that God has continued to use the church to extend His kingdom" (John White).

Any cursory look at the history of the church will reveal that unity has marked its progress very rarely, if at all. The divisions that exist today are too obvious and numerous to require any comment here. They appear on the surface and extend down into the depths of the church. Lines have been drawn, battle rage and the casualties from friendly fire everywhere abound. Does this mean Jesus' prayer for the unity of His church has failed to come to pass? Not at all! In fact, the reason Jesus prays for the unity of His Body is exactly because He foresaw all these differences we would experience and so prays for a greater unity to exist among His people in spite of all their differences.

The first thing we need to establish here is what kind of unity is Jesus referring to? One thing's for sure – the church was never intended to be a great organizational unity. There may be many advantages associated with a massive organizational unity but the down size is it fails to produce the kind of results Jesus prays for and it doesn't solve the other great problems of the church. This approach to unity has been tried extensively and has been found wanting.

In the early days of the church there was a lot of great energy and growth but little organizational unity. Later, as the church came to be accepted under Constantine and others, it became increasingly centralized until

during the Middle Ages there was literally one united ecclesiastical body covering all of Europe. But was this a great age of the church? Was there a deep unity of faith? Did people find themselves increasingly drawn to this faith and confess Jesus to be their Savior and Lord? That's what Jesus is praying for: if the church is unified, people would believe on Him. Is that what happened during the Middle Ages? Not at all! On the contrary, the world believed the complete opposite. In that age, Christianity was perceived as being a crushing, tyrannical, superstitious, ignorant thing that caused the rational thinking person to become infidels, forcing them to turn to the heresy of humanism: turning man into his own god. Many mainline denominations still put all their hope and faith in organizational unity with the same miserable results.

Another type of unity that is counterproductive in the church is conformity: the attempt to make everyone the same. This is the mistake of many evangelical churches: striving for an identical pattern of looks and behavior among its members. That's not what Jesus is asking for in this prayer. The truth is, since God has made us all different, there should be the greatest diversity among Christians, diversity of personality, interests, lifestyle, and even methods of Christian work and evangelism. This should make the church interesting, not dull. Uniformity is dull, like rows upon rows of corn stalks in a field. 1 or 2 may be interesting but mile upon mile of corn rows becomes boring very quickly. Variety is exciting! There's variety in the nature, the character and the actions of our God so it should be accepted and even expected that there will also be great variety found in the gathering of His people.

Well then, if the unity Jesus prays for is not organizational or achieved by conformity, what unity is He talking about?

The answer is: a unity like the unity that exists within the Godhead. Jesus mentions this in 21 and 23, meaning the church should have a spiritual unity that involves the basic direction, desires, and will of those participating in it. Paul points to this true unity in [1 Cor 12:4-6](#). The gifts are diverse, the ministries are different and the activities are diverse. But it's the same Spirit, same Lord and same God doing the work through the gifts, ministries and activities.

This doesn't mean every believer actually enter into this unity as they should; else, why would Jesus pray for it? The truth of the matter is that, just like the other marks of the church already considered, unity is something

given to the church but it's also something that the body of true believers should constantly strive for. There's a sense in which we're already one in Christ (spiritually) but there's also a sense in which we must achieve that unity (practically).

We've established what kind of unity Jesus is praying for but the next question is, what does this unity look like? The answer is found by observing the various images used for the church throughout the NT, the most valuable is that of the family. Christians belong to the family of God, and they are rightly brothers and sisters of one another. The unique nature of this image is that it speaks of relationship and the commitments we have to one another. The relationships are based on what God has done: He's saved us and made us His children and thus, members of His spiritual family. This has 2 important consequences. 1<sup>st</sup>, if the family we now belong to has been established by God, then we don't get to choose who will be in it or if we'll be their brother or sister. No, the relationship simply exists by God's work and will and we must be brotherly to the other believer, whether we want to be or not.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> consequence is related to the 1<sup>st</sup> in that we must be committed to each other in tangible ways. We must be committed to helping each other because we all need help at times, and this is one clear way in which the special bond among believers can be shown to the watching world. We need help as Christians and we need to receive it from other Christians. So, we must be ready to give that help, just as we would a needy member of our own family.

The next image used to portray the unity of the church is a fellowship, which the NT normally indicates by the Greek word *koinonia*. Unfortunately, neither word is very helpful in conveying what Jesus means here because the English word usually refers to a loose collection of friends; while the Greek is no more than a theological cliché. Actually, in the NT period, the word referred to sharing or having something in common. The common secular use of the day referred to partners, like those who held property in common or shared in a business. In spiritual terms *koinonia*, or fellowship, refers to those who share a common Christian experience of the gospel. Thus, the NT often speaks of our fellowship with the Father (1 John 1:3), with the Son (1 Cor 1:9), and with the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14). This clearly involves the totality of the believer's experience of God's grace. But

fellowship is not only defined in terms of what we share in together. It also involves what we share out together. Meaning, Christian fellowship must involve a community where Christians actually share their thoughts and lives with one another. This is easier to do in a small congregation but is not impossible in a larger group; it just requires some extra work.

The third image used in the NT to stress the unity of the church is the body. Clearly, this image has many important connotations. It speaks of the nature of the Christian union: one part of the body cannot survive if it's separated from the rest. It speaks of interdependence. It even alludes to a kind of subordination that involves a diversity of function. The hand isn't the foot, the foot isn't the eye, and over all is the head which is Christ ([1 Cor 12:12-14](#)). Every cell in the human body is linked by a common root (DNA) yet, the parts of the body look different, are treated differently, work differently and accomplish different purposes. Likewise, there is great diversity in the Body of Christ, both in appearance and function, yet each member has a common root (Jesus) and a common goal (mission). In fact, the one function of the body that's unique to this image is service, for just as the family emphasizes relationships, and fellowship emphasizes sharing, so the image of the body emphasizes work. The body exists to do something and, since we are talking about unity, we must stress that it exists to enable us to do this work together.

[22-23](#) – Jesus declares that He has given His disciples the same glory that the Father has given to Him. What does He mean? Just as His true glory was to follow the path of lowly service that would result in His death on the cross, so the true glory for the disciples lay in the path of lowly service wherever it may lead them. History teaches us that it would lead to untimely death for all but 1 of them. Why? Because as far as the world was concerned, this little band of disciples and their Master were insignificant as the world counts importance. But, the disciples were right with God which made them supremely significant to Him. They have the true glory because they are walking in God's way.

The Lord's purpose for giving them this glory was ultimately for their unity. This unity of heart, of desire, of purpose will transcend all human unity and will be impossible for the world to even understand, let alone duplicate. The unity Jesus is referring to is a spiritual unity that only those who have been made spiritually alive by God Himself can ever hope to experience or benefit

from. The world will never understand this kind of unity but it can observe it, but only on the basis of divine love. When the love of God for the church is fully realized by the church and is selflessly expressed to the rest of the church, the world will see the love of God revealed and they will be influenced by it.

As was mentioned last time, the world can't see God but they can see the church. What the world sees in the church is what they will believe about God. If they see love and unity, they will believe God is love; if they see hatred and division, they will reject the message of the Gospel. We have every reason to love one another and live in unity. We trust the same Savior, share the same glory and will enjoy the same heaven. We belong to the same Father, are commissioned to do the same work, believe the same truth and follow the same example Jesus set for His people – to live a holy life. Yes, Christians, by nature, have their differences but we also have many more important things in common and this should encourage us to love one another and promote true spiritual unity.

As a Christian living and operating within the Body of Christ, you're not just a name on a list, a body in the seat, a cog in the wheel or just a face in the crowd. No, if you have accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior, you're a chosen member of God's family, a valued partner in His fellowship, a vital part of the Body of Christ. We each have been saved for a purpose, created and called to a function in His church. That function involves both our testimony to the world and our service to our brothers and sisters in Christ. The only way we can realize our full potential in Christ is to do so through the mechanism of the church. No church is perfect, mainly because it is populated by people, but every church has a calling and a function and our personal calling is only ever achieved through this unity of the Body that Jesus prays for here. It's a unity that leads to a fuller experience of both the Father and Son which will in turn result in drawing the world to Christ through the visible expression of God's love by the unified church. 😊