

JOHN 17:20-26 and 1JOHN 2:12-17 THAT WE MAY BE ONE

Introduction

It is difficult to read or listen to any news without hearing about COVID-19. It is surprising that this virus has in less than six months, changed our everyday lifestyles – not only in Nigeria but the world over!

The situation has not only called for concern but has created anxiety, fear, frustration and untold hardship among citizens of all nations, including Christian communities. It has produced these effects because since the fall of man, there have been sicknesses and diseases among the human race but not like this one. We continue to give thanks to God, knowing that He is solidly on His throne and in charge of all affairs in the universe. We believe that even though He allows this affliction to come upon us, yet He will cause us to rejoice again and greatly. Let us not be discouraged, let our hearts not fail us, let us not allow fear but faith to dominate our lives.

But in a time like this, what does God requires of us?

Unity Required Beyond Words

In John 17, Jesus prayed, not only for the people seated around him at the table that evening but also for his future followers, which includes us. And it is a prayer that focuses on unity, on all being one. Jesus prayed:

“that they may all be one, just 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 have sent me.” - John 17:21

Three times Jesus asks our Father that we would all become one as he and the Father are one. When he prayed for his disciples and us to be one, he saw us as one already. He did not see us as isolated individuals but persons in community with one another. He did not see us as apart from each other. If Jesus saw us that way, then there is an implication here for us: that we should see ourselves the same way, and

live out the consequences of this unity which is the prayer of Christ. His vision indeed is that we are one. This means that to be a follower of Jesus is to be a part of a greater whole. There are to be no solitary Christians or spiritual lone rangers.

Jesus knew that in a church community made up of people of different backgrounds, there could be disagreements. But the mystery of his incarnation is that God desired unity with us so much that He became one of us. And in that moment we were drawn into the oneness of God. The resurrection of Jesus further brings with it a new world in which those once at odds are now reconciled and united. Therefore, we are to be one just as he and the Father are one – and this oneness is to be demonstrated in actions and not just words.

It is very clear that Jesus' words are meant for everyone -- then and now – as he prays for “those who will believe in me” – v20. As it was for the disciples then, so also it is crucial for us today to return to Jesus' prayer for unity, live and stand together as members of the one, catholic and universal body of Christ – the Church.

In Galatians 3:28-29, Paul the apostle, caught this message and he echoed it by declaring that in Christ there is “neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one.” Here he insists that Christians are no longer separated from each other by ethnicity, social status, and gender. He does not claim that these characteristics are abolished, but he insists that for Christians, these are no longer factors that separate people into antagonistic sides. In the Christian community, Gentiles and Jews find themselves one, as do slaves and masters, women and men.

The pandemic situation requires that beyond individual prayers, we unite together and collectively seek God's face for intervention, deliverance and healing. We need to be of one mind – because we are one in Christ. To become a part of Christ is to become a part of the community; a part of the one.

This does not mean that we must all get along or have to agree all the time. Oneness here does not mean uniformity, reducing everybody to a dull and flat sameness. Instead, it means that we do not allow our differences to be barriers any more. It does not mean losing our identity or individuality. Oneness is less about numbers and quantity and more qualitative. Jesus and the Father are one because they love and give themselves to each other. Oneness is a quality of life – God’s life. Our diversity or differences should be means of enriching one another and not division.

There are several benefits of living in unity:

- a. Unity is necessary because Jesus prayed for it “so that the world may believe that you have sent me,” - v21. Our unity is rooted in Christ’s own unity with the Father. If Jesus prayed for unity in the Church then it must be important. When we unite and become one, we are being obedient to the Lord Jesus Christ!
- b. Unity is necessary for effective presentation of the gospel, v23b. The Church exists in order to reach the world. The church is here to be God's instrument by which human life in every area and at every level is penetrated by the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church needs to take advantage of the COVID-19 situation to reach out to communities with the gospel through our care, love and compassion. By so doing, some may be saved. Disharmony will cause the Church to become inward-focused and to lose its evangelistic passion
- c. Unity is necessary for the power of God. When God’s hand is on a Church or a group of people his power rests on them. This power is necessary for the unity of mind and purpose that is needed to follow the word of the Lord, 2Chronicles 30:12. It is needed for healing and deliverance from plaques and pestilences.
- d. Unity keeps the Church body growing, maturing, and working at its fullest potential- 1Corinthians 12:12, Eph 4:3. Unity is a powerful witness. A unified church is

one of the strongest evidences of the truth of the gospel. This is especially true in a world as fragmented and divisive as ours, where tribal and cultural divisions among diverse people stand out. Through unity, we gain opportunities for joy, mutual comfort and encouragement.

- e. Unity keeps Christ at the center instead of us, Ephesians 1:10b. It is not about you but it is about Christ! The Psalmist said it well when he wrote, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" Psalm 131:1
- f. Unity flows from love and love unites the church in its mission. Without love there is no unity whatsoever. This love must be focused on and received from Jesus Christ. There is no other way to keep harmony and stay on mission.
- g. Great is the force of unity, peace, and concord. When we unite, one man will serve to strengthen and establish the other. It is common knowledge that many broomsticks or staves bound together in one bundle are not easily broken, but when they are separated, they are easily broken with little strength. Nothing derails vision faster than disunity - whether in business, a team, a family, or a church. No wonder, Jesus taught that a house divided against itself shall fall, Mark 3:25

Unity is About Love

Oneness is not about eliminating differences. Oneness and unity is about love. Love is the only thing that can ever overcome division. Our unity, our oneness is to be a sign to the world of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. Over and over Jesus calls us to love God, love your neighbors, love yourself and love your enemy. We live in a world that is characterized by divisions and factions - male or female; rich or poor; educated or uneducated; young or old; sinner or saved, etc. This is not to talk of the boundaries and

divisions often set by tribal and racial differences! These are not just divisions but have become oppositions. If anyone promotes these in the church, family or community, such truly does not have the love of the Father in them. That is why scripture says:

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” – 1John 2:15

If we truly love God, we will live a life of unity. Our love for God, neighbor and enemy is further demonstrated by our oneness, and the measure of our oneness, our God-likeness, is love. In love there may be differences but there is no division. God’s love knows no boundaries except that between godly and sinful lifestyles. If you love God, you will love the people of God by working daily to ensure a united and peaceful coexistence. This is required of all who are in the Lord – the children (new converts), the youth (matured believers) and the fathers/mothers (disciplers and mentors). Christ is all and in all.

Conclusion

God wants His people to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Unity is God’s divine strategy -- to make all Christians share one life in one great family and so make the world, starve for meaningful personal relationships with Him and with one another. The world will believe when they see that the Church is one.

Unity in the Christian Church has been a challenging thing since the earliest days of Christianity. Yet we are called to strive towards it. For the sake of our relationship with Christ and for the sake of a world that is not just sinful and confused, but facing enormously complex problems, we need to be united and not be isolated from one another. We dare not live our Christian lives in comfortable compartments, limited only to Christian friends, but even those outside of Christ. By so doing, we let the light of Christ shine in the darkness.

By praying for our oneness, Jesus recognizes and rejects the boundaries and differences that divide us. These divisions first occur in the human heart before existing in the world and are usually established by human beings for their selfish purposes. Such boundaries and divisions are not about issues but about real people, with names and needs just like us. Those through whom the devil works to scatter the Church are real and not imaginary persons. Are you one of such? Have you played any role in creating barriers, boundaries and divisions in the body of Christ or your family? Repent and return to the Lord!

God does not draw boundaries between Jesus and us. He does not love Jesus more than anyone else. If Jesus prays for our unity and loves us without boundary, how can we do anything less and still call ourselves Christians? If you find yourself working against the unity of the Church anytime, check your relationship with God through Jesus Christ and be reconciled with Him through confession and repentance. Christ is not divided, 1Cor 1:13, Eph 4:5.

Remember that for every seed of discord (disunity) that you plant in Church or family, you oppose and reject what Christ suffered on our behalf. You openly “undo” the purpose of his passion and crucifixion. This should not be so.

“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility....that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” Ephesians 2:14-15