

Christ's Prayer for Unification (part I)

John 17:20-26

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April 17, 2024 a.m.

Introduction: Thus far in our study of John 17, Christ's High Priestly Prayer, we have examined Christ's prayer for the glorification of the Savior (:1-5) & for His prayer for the sanctification of the sent ones (His disciples in verses 6-19). Beginning tonight we will examine the unification of the saints (:20-26). "The concluding section of the prayer is of the greatest interest for in it Jesus prays for all believers. It is thus a prayer for us as for those of previous generations. The dominant concern in the section is for unity & for the divine glory" (Leon Morris). Consider the story behind the hymn "Onward, Christian Soldiers." Is this song doctrinally correct when it says: "...We are not divided, all one body we, one in hope & doctrine, one in charity"? Ask yourself another question: "Could Jesus Christ have prayed a prayer that God would not or could not answer? If so, then either Jesus asked for something contrary to the Father's will (impossible), or else all of Christ's own promises that our prayers will be answered are a hollow farce (unthinkable). What, then, do we make of Christ's express desire for the unity, or the oneness, of His people?" (Talbert). Let's consider the context, the content, & the concept of Biblical unity this evening. Next week we will look at the consequences of Biblical unity & then then the cautions concerning Biblical unity, with an emphasis upon verses 24-26.

I. The **context** of Biblical unity (John 17:11 & cf.:6, 9, 14-19)

A. Those given to Christ (:6) > His apostles

B. Those who will believe in Christ (:20) > genuine believers (review: 6-19)

1. Those separate (set apart) from the world ("*out of*" - salvation, yet "*in the world*" - situation).
2. Those distinct from the world ("*not of*" - separation, yet "*sent into the world*" - service).

II. The **content** of Biblical unity (:15-21)

A. Belief in Biblical truth (the Word of God) > acknowledgment of truth

1. Consider the testimony of David – Psalm 119 (& II Samuel 23:2).
2. Consider the testimony of Christ – John 17:17 (& cf. Matthew 4:4).

B. Loyalty to Biblical truth > adherence to truth

1. Those who are demonstrators of truth; they live it.
2. Those who are defenders of truth; they proclaim it.

Contrast: Ecumenism says: "Doctrine divides; love unites." But Gillies points out in his book, Unity in the Dark, "The price of ecumenical success is the surrender of the authority & sufficiency of Holy Scripture." [cf. Acts 2:42 > doctrine before fellowship & see Eph. 4:4-6]

III. The **concept** of Biblical unity (:11, 21, and 22)

A. The explanation of such unity (:11, 21, and 22 – "*as we are one*")

1. What it is not:
 - a. It is not physical, external, structural, or organizational oneness.
 - b. It is not external uniformity or organizational unification.
2. What it is:
 - a. It is spiritual & internal, illustrated by the "*oneness*" of the Father & Son.
 - b. It is identified by their "*oneness*" in outlook, values, goals, & destiny.

Application: “Biblical oneness is an organic unity – an internal, spiritual unity of identity, outlook, values, goals, & destiny. It spans denominational divisions, external diversities, ideological differences & even honest theological disagreement to unite as brothers & sisters in one Body every genuinely regenerated child of God” (Talbert).

B. The expression of such unity (:11, 22)

1. Expressed by the *preservation* in one Body (:11).

- a. Refers to a unity already there – Jesus prays that they may “continually be” (not “become”) one (see I Corinthians 12:13, “*For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; & have been all made to drink into one Spirit.*”). Consider the local church: unity of the faith & diversity in the gifts.
- b. Reflects the unity of having Christ abide in believers & they in Him (see Ephesians 2:14-22 & 4:3). Consider 17:21 > “It is not experiential unity, but the unity of common eternal life shared by all who believe the truth & it results in the one Body of Christ all sharing His life” (MacArthur).

2. Expressed by the *manifestation* of one God (:22).

- a. The “*glory of the Lord*” is given to believers; such “*glory*” is the personal presence of God – cf. Ex. 24:16; 40:5; II Chron. 7:1-2; Isa. 6:3 with Isa. 40:5; Jn 1:14; Heb. 1:1-3.
- b. Believers are to be the visible manifestation of God in this world (cf. I Cor. 10:31).

Application: “How then should we live?” – I Pet. 1:16-17; I Cor. 6:19-20; Mt. 5:16. What are we “telling” the world about God from our lives? Our testimony in public? Are we sending a consistent message?

Summary: John 17 is not a call for believers to be a unity, but rather to acknowledge the truth that there is a spirit of oneness in the Body of Christ. Note > Truth & love must go together (Eph. 4:15). “It has well been said that truth without love is brutality, but love without truth is hypocrisy. The mind grows by taking in truth, but the heart grows by giving out in love. Knowledge alone can lead to pride (I Cor. 8:1), & love alone can lead to wrong decisions (Phil. 1:9-10). Christian love must not be blind” (Wiersbe).

Conclusion: D. Martin Lloyd Jones (a British pastor of renown) preached in response to those in the British Isles who wanted to push ecumenism. Using the same texts the liberals put forth for ecumenical unity (John 17 & Ephesians 4), Jones stated, “Unity is not something which exists, or of which you can speak, in & of itself. It is always the consequence of our belief & acceptance of this great & glorious doctrine of God who has provided in His Son the way of salvation, & who mediates it to us through the operation of the Holy Spirit. That is the basis & the nature of Christian unity.” Christ’s prayer is not for unification in the sense used by ecumenists. There is not a call for organizational unity or the end of denominations (the real goal of ecumenism). It is a reminder to those genuinely in Christ to acknowledge our unity & act like it. One of the practical evidences of such unity will be a willingness to receive criticism offered by those who are speaking the truth in love. True spiritual maturity causes one to admit his shortcomings & to profit even from criticism (cf. Proverbs 9:8-10). Has the prayer of Christ been answered? Might we demonstrate by our lives & by our lips the doctrinal correctness of Baring-Gould’s hymn, “...We are not divided, all one body we, One in hope & doctrine, one in charity.”